

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Septuagesima – January 28, 2024**  
**Matthew 20:1-16 – Workers in the Vineyard**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

The season of pre-Lent, starting today, is the strangest little season of the church year. Why not let Epiphany continue a few more weeks, and let Ash Wednesday be the start of Lent? Why is there a season of getting ready for the season of getting ready for Holy Week and Easter?

Well, certainly Easter is the climax of the whole church year. Any time spent preparing for Easter is time well spent. Still, this pre-Lenten season is strange. Even the names of the three Sundays are strange. Septuagesima, Sexagesima, Quinquagesima, what do they even mean? And the themes of the Sundays are strange too. Today we heard about the workers in the vineyard – why? How does that get us ready for Lent? And next Sunday is the Parable of the Sower. The Sower sowed the seed, the word of God, into various types of soil. How does that fit in? And then on Quinquagesima in two weeks, we will hear about Jesus healing a blind man by the side of the road at Jericho. All very strange. If I were inventing the church calendar, I would never have come up with pre-Lent.

But the wisdom of the church and the liturgy is a wisdom of the ages. Pre-Lent has been observed for 1500 years. And the church did not invent things randomly. There were good reasons. So we do well to listen to the wisdom of the ages, to retain wholesome practices, even if they don't immediately make sense to us. Because then we place ourselves humbly at the feet of our forefathers in the faith, to learn from them. It's for this reason that we sing the ancient hymns, and keep the ancient liturgy, and follow the ancient church calendar. This is why we confess the ancient doctrines and creeds. Because we know we can learn from the saints who went before us. Retaining their teaching and practice helps us meditate more deeply on God's word and how it fits together in the life of the church.

So. What about pre-Lent? First of all, the strange names. Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima are simply Latin terms that mean 70, 60, and 50. Because, Septuagesima is approximately 70 days until Easter, Sexagesima is about 60 days until Easter, and Quinquagesima is about 50 days until Easter. The three Sundays are a countdown to the beginning of Lent, the 40 days before Easter, like the 40 days of Jesus in the wilderness.

So the names make sense. But what about the strange readings for each Sunday? Septuagesima, today, is the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Today is an invitation for us to become laborers in God's vineyard, in the church. Christians are called to labor in the vineyard in different ways. Some are called to the public ministry, like pastors and missionaries. Others are called to teach children in the school, assisting parents in their God-given responsibility to raise children in the faith. Others are called to serve the congregation according to their abilities, as elders or liturgical assistants. Or as administrators, or by visiting the sick, or praying for one another, and so on. There are many different vocations, or callings, in the church. Each of us is called to labor for the gospel according to the gifts God has given us.

Truly, the Christian life is a life of labor. God calls us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. But our work is not drudgery. We have good and joyful work to do. We lay our hand to the plow gladly, without looking back. It may be hard at times, with many difficult challenges to face, but it's completely worthwhile. And although we may feel burdened, the burden of Christ is easy. As Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

But think of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Some worked a long hard day, some a short one, but all received the same reward. Regardless of how long or hard we labor, all Christians get the same reward. You are called to labor in the vineyard, in the church and throughout the world, without any expectation of any reward at all. For you know that your works merit nothing before God. And yet, you labor in faith, knowing that God loves you and has called you by the gospel. And God chooses, of his own free will and grace, to give you all his good gifts. Though you deserve nothing, God chooses to forgive all your sins, to shower you with his blessings of word and sacrament, and to give you the promise of life everlasting. That is the reward that you neither expect nor earn, but which God promises to give you.

It's all for the sake of Jesus, because of his great work of salvation. Your works earn nothing, your works

deserve nothing, but the work of Jesus, to come down from heaven and live a perfect righteous life and bear our sins and take them to the cross and suffer and die, all for you – that is a great work that deserve a tremendous reward. The reward God the Father gave his Son for his great work of salvation was the kingdom of heaven, eternal life, resurrection forever. And Jesus chooses to share that eternal reward with all who come to him in faith.

So you are all workers in the vineyard. Some of you became Christians early in life, as children. Many of you were baptized as babies. You are like workers that the master called early in the day to come into the vineyard. Each was promised a denarius, a day's wages. Others of you were called later in life, later in the day. Perhaps you were raised in a Christian home, but you didn't actually come to love the things of God until years later. You came to faith as teenagers, or adults, like those hired later in the morning and at noonday. And perhaps some of you didn't even become Christians until you were old. Better late than never. Now that you're here, the master is pleased to promise you your wages. And perhaps you've even heard of eleventh-hour Christians, those who didn't believe until their final deathbed. Like those hired to work in the vineyard at the eleventh hour. Even with them, God is pleased. No matter when someone comes to faith, even if only in the final moments, they are Christians, they are saved.

So at the end of the day, at the end of the age, when our Lord Jesus comes again in glory to judge all things, he will give each Christian his promised wages. Truly, we know we are sinners, and the wages of sin is death. Our wages ought to be hell and eternal damnation. But our God, in his great mercy and love, for the sake of the atoning death of Jesus in our place, chooses to give us his own wages instead. The wages of life everlasting.

So rejoice, and give thanks and praise to God forever, for these magnificent, undeserved wages, the wages of eternal life in heaven forever!

And never grumble or begrudge your fellow Christians, those whom you do not think are working as hard or as long as you. Don't begrudge them for the wages their gracious master chooses to give. Rejoice with them, that all who heed the upward call of God in Christ Jesus receive the same magnificent free gift. Do not grumble, for in the kingdom of heaven, the last will be first, and the first last.

So this is the call of Septuagesima. Come work in the vineyard! Come work for your master, who offers a reward that is totally unfair, far better than anything we deserve. Come work with glad and thankful hearts. And examine your way of life, how you are serving God and your neighbor in the church. Repent of your laziness as a worker, turn to God for forgiveness, and pray for new energy for the good and joyful task. Run that you may obtain the prize. Do it all with love and patience for one another, without envy or boastfulness or any such thing. And your Lord will reward you with a reward beyond belief or merit, the blessings of eternal life.

As for the next two Sundays, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima, these will build on today's calling to work in the vineyard. Sexagesima presents the task and calling of Christians in greater detail, with the Parable of the Sower. The Sower is Jesus, who spreads and preaches his seed, casting his word into our hearts. And the Holy Spirit tends and nourishes the soil of our hearts to make it good, abundant soil. Your task is to receive the word of God, keep it, and bear abundant fruit. And even that isn't your own work, it's thanks to the Holy Spirit at work in you.

And finally, Quinquagesima reveals the underlying great work of Christ. Because when Jesus healed the blind man outside of Jericho, he took his disciples aside to explain his entire mission, the basis behind all his work. "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."

So now, perhaps, you understand the point of the season of pre-Lent. Why we need a season of preparing for the season of preparing for Holy Week and Easter. In Lent, we are supposed to come before God in contrition and sorrow for our sins, seeking his mercy. So first we need to prepare our hearts to recognize our sin and our Savior. And that is what pre-Lent is doing. Today we have heard the call of the Christian life. Get to work in the vineyard! But we've also started to realize how incompetent we are. We show up late for work, we grumble against one another. None of us deserve our wages, we only deserve the wages of death. But our good master chooses, in his great generosity, to give us all the same undeserved wage, eternal life.

And then, as the Parable of the Sower next Sunday will show, our God promises to feed us with his word, to tend us in the church, in his vineyard, to nourish our hearts and remove the rocks and thorns by the work of the Holy Spirit. He promises to do all the saving.

And the basis of it all is the cross. As Quinquagesima shows, our wages of sin and death fell upon the Son

of Man, who went up to Jerusalem to be mocked and spit upon and crucified. But he rose from the dead, to give us his wages of eternal life forever.

So let us repent, for we are poor laborers in the vineyard, poor servants of God. But let us give thanks, for our gracious Lord has become our servant, in his great love, to die for our salvation. Amen!

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.