

"Rightful Expectations"  
Luke 20:9-20

April 7, 2019

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Remember the board game called Monopoly? I'm sure all of us have played that game sometime in our life. One of the things you did while you were busy going around the board, buying up real estate was to draw cards when you landed on the space marked Chance or Community Chest. These cards penalized you, rewarded you, or gave you instructions on what to do. One of these cards was called the "Get Out of Jail Free." This card cost you nothing and you didn't have to do anything with it until you needed it. Then, whenever you were sent to jail, you could simply produce the card and use it to "get out of jail free" immediately instead of paying a fine or waiting for 3 rolls of the dice to get out.

Soon, this phrase "Get Out Of Jail Free" became a metaphorical way of referring to anything that will get someone out of an undesirable situation or allow them to avoid punishment. For example, you might hear on the news that a State Department official warned Americans traveling abroad that their nationality is not a get-out-of-jail-free card if they break the law in another country.

I think we would all enjoy having a multitude of "get out of jail free" cards – things that cost us nothing which we don't have to think about or do anything with until we need them which we then can produce to get us out of a difficult situation.

What I have just described is how many people view or are in danger of viewing the Christian faith and their salvation. These things have become simply one big "get out of jail free" card (or, better yet, a "get out of hell free" card). Like a "get out of jail free" card, salvation has cost us nothing. We rejoice because God has saved us by His grace – His undeserved love – through the merits and work of Jesus Christ, His Son and the Savior of the world. Jesus paid the price for our salvation through his perfect life of obedience to the Divine Law and sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus procured our new life here and eternal life to come by His glorious resurrection from the dead on Easter morning.

Like a "get out of jail free" card, many think salvation is something we just hold on to until we needed. We really don't need to do anything until that time, people think, because Jesus did it all. Since Jesus did it all, we get the idea that God therefore expects nothing from us and nothing is what many people are only too happy to give to God. People think that they can live the life they want to live and then simply present their "get out of jail free" card on their death bed and everything will be all right.

When encouraged to do good works, feed our faith on the Word of God, or gather to receive His gifts in Divine Service, we plead grace. People will say, "We don't have to do those things because we are saved by grace. If we have other things which we would like to do instead to serve ourselves or if we don't desire to give our time in worship and service of our Lord, we don't worry. God will just have to understand. Besides, we believe in Jesus. We have our "get out of jail free" card. We'll use it later when we need it. If people exhort us to change their actions, reform

their way of living or doing anything differently, we call them legalists and continue doing things our way.

How is it that we have perverted the meaning and purpose of grace? Does God really have no expectations of us? Does grace cancel out obedience? Has God changed from a holy God who expects us to be holy into a God who really doesn't care? Does grace really mean that we can do whatever we want or that we do not have to do what God wants?

Jesus tells a parable to answer these questions. The parable begins with grace. A certain man planted a vineyard and gave control over it to some tenant farmers. These farmers did not own the land and did not pay for it. The man bought and paid for the vineyard all by himself and it still belonged to him. This was a common practice in Israel at the time – to have absentee landlords who owned property but allowed workers to live on the property and farm the property with the understanding that some of the fruit would be given back to the owner.

When the man came back after a long journey into another country, he had expectations of his tenants. He expected them to give back to him some of the fruit. But the tenants had become so smug. They acted as if the vineyard and everything in it was theirs and that they owed nothing to the owner. When he sends a slave to receive his rightful share of the fruit, the tenants beat him and send him away empty-handed. He sends a second slave who is beaten and treated shamefully. They send him away empty-handed. He sends yet a third slave whom they wounded and cast out.

The owner (the Greek uses the word "Lord") of the vineyard is amazingly gracious and extremely patient toward his tenants. Out of his great love or perhaps his naïveté, he sends his son to collect the fruit. The tenants do something extremely strange. They say, "This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours." Why did they ever think that killing the son would do any good? They figured that, since the son was coming to collect the fruit, the owner must be dead. If they kill the son, then the property would be ownerless and they could claim. So, they threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him.

Jesus asks a question in order to make the point of this parable. He says, "What then will the owner (or Lord) of the vineyard do to them?" Jesus answers his own question, "He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." And no one would have blamed him if he did.

This is all very similar to how God's people in the Old Testament had acted. God chose them by His grace – His undeserved love – to be His special people. He planted His kingdom like a vineyard in their midst out of pure grace. God did it all. He did the choosing. He did the saving from slavery in Egypt. He established the sacrificial system of animals in the tabernacle and later in the Temple by which the Jewish people freely received forgiveness for all of their sins.

The Jews did not deserve or even earn God's love for them. Often, though, they forgot about this "grace" part. They made two crucial mistakes. First, they thought they were inhabitants of the Lord's vineyard because of their righteousness. So, they literally acted like they owned the place. Second, they felt that, since God had done it

all the in order to establish them as a nation, this meant they didn't have to do anything.

But God did expect something from His nation, His vineyard. He expected fruit. He expected certain behavior on the part of the Jews, not in order to establish the vineyard, but in response to the fact that the vineyard was already established. He expected repentance when the people sinned – genuine sorrow over sin, turning from sin, and trusting the Lord for forgiveness. He expected generosity in giving to support the Lord's work and to serve the neighbor. He expected changed attitudes in response to God's love and care for them.

The Lord sent prophets to gain this fruit. However, the prophets met with resistance, first from the priests and religious hierarchy who failed to proclaim God's grace and, instead, turned it into a religion of law; and secondly from the people themselves who were led to believe that, if they simply did the religious rituals, they could do anything they wanted after that. You know the story of the Old Testament. The prophets of the Lord were mocked, beaten, and sometimes killed by the priests and religious hierarchy. The religious hierarchy refused to change their message and the people refused to change their behavior.

The people were not bothered by this. The Jews felt special, even privileged. They had the Holy City, Jerusalem. They had the Temple where God had promised to dwell always. It didn't matter what evil they did or what good they failed to do for they, too, had a "get out of jail free" card. They could always say, "we are the children of Israel. God would never do anything to us."

At long last, God decided to send His Son. But the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and all the religious hierarchy had rejected Jesus. This reached a crescendo when he entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday just a few days before our text. In fact, it drove Jesus to tears. He wept over the city for their corrupt leadership, their rebellious people, and the judgment which He knew was coming.

As with the Lord of the vineyard, the Lord of heaven and earth would destroy those evil tenants. In 70 A.D. troops from Rome came and tore the city down and burned the Temple. He would also give the vineyard to new tenants. From 70 A.D. onward, there would be no Temple sacrifice. The new tenants of the vineyard would be the followers of Jesus, most of whom were Gentiles.

What about us? How does this apply to us? It is much in the same way as it applies to the Jews. God has chosen us by grace through faith in Jesus' action on the cross and tomb. We did not deserve that salvation. We did not earn it by our good works. In fact, there is nothing at all we could do to be part of the Lord's vineyard. Sometimes, we forget that. We may think that God chose us because we were morally good or religiously dedicated. But that's not true. He created his church by pure grace and has planted us in His vineyard.

Like the Lord of the vineyard did not require anything of the tenant farmers in order to gain the land but still expected something from them, so God does not require anything of you for the forgiveness of your sin, the new life you have, and the eternal life you will have, but He still expects something from you.

What is that? Various kinds of fruit. There is the “fruits of repentance” which follow (not cause) the grace given to us in Holy Baptism. John the Baptist exhorted the people who came to him for baptism to not simply go through the motions and becoming baptized, but to live changed lives that reflect God’s grace. The message is for us today as well. God expects us, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, to actually change our behavior to conform with the will of God if we are indeed sorry and repentant. Stop doing the bad if indeed we think we have sinned. Don’t just accept it or excuse it. Actually, do the good which God expects without using grace as an excuse or justification. As St. Paul warned those in Rome who already had the brilliant idea that salvation by grace entitled us to continue in sin, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2)

There are the firstfruits – our gifts and our tithes – which are given out of the abundance of material wealth with which God has blessed us and which we return to Him in gratitude and faith to support the ministry of the Word of God in this church, to support reaching out with God’s mercy and forgiveness to the world, and to support caring for our neighbors’ needs.

There are fruits of the Spirit – changed attitudes and actions brought about by God’s grace and mercy active in us. Some of these fruits are described by St. Paul: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Do not be deceived. Do not pervert the grace of God. God does expect to receive the fruit He desires. When God sends His servants to tell us this and to call us to repentance, do not ignore them. Do not send them away empty-handed. And certainly, do not harm them. They are only coming to gather that which God has a right to expect from His people. Do not depend upon some magic “get out of jail free” card to be waiting for you. For those, who by God’s grace, refuse to live in faith and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, refuse to live by faith, no such card will be there.

What will God do then? For those who continue take in God’s grace, but refuse to produce fruit instead clinging to their confirmation, church membership, and “get out of jail free” card for comfort, remember what God did to the Jews who acted the same. Everything, including our destruction, is on the table for us. And the vineyard will be given to others. Today, we already see Christianity dead in Europe and dying in North America. It is already being given to places such as Africa where it is joyfully being received and fruit is being produced.

Viewing your salvation and faith as only a “get out of jail free” card is both erroneous and dangerous. While it is true that you do nothing to enter God’s kingdom, that does not mean you are free to do nothing after you’ve entered. Grace saves, but it does not trump God’s desire for your lives. You produce fruit, not in order to become workers in the vineyard, but because you already are. God will forgive your mistakes and sins when repented of and turned away from. He will empower you to produce fruit through his Word and His Holy Sacraments. Receive joyfully all that God has given, gives, and will give out of grace. Rejoice equally joyfully to have the privilege of returning some of those gifts to Him. Amen.