

(organ music) (soft music) (choir singing) (intense music) (choir singing)

- Let us know honestly confess before God, the things that we have done or failed to do, which have caused us to be less effective servants. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. We have thought of ourselves more highly than we ought, forgetting that your favor rests on all your children. We have spoken the false witness of empty promises, idol, gossip, and calculated lies preferring our own advantage to the advancement of truth. We have labored long to protect our power and promote our privilege, ignoring the desperate condition of your people and the commandment to deny ourselves through love and service to others. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. In the darkness of pride, we imagine ourselves good. But in the light of your holy Law, we are miserable offenders. For the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us. Forgive us our sins against you and your children, our neighbors. Create in us a clean heart and renew a right spirit, that we may again love mercy, seek justice, and walk in your way through Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen. Hear these words of assurance. God raises up the needy out of affliction. Whoever is wise, let him give heed to these things. Let us consider the steadfast love of the Lord, amen. On this beautiful day, we welcome you to the Duke University Chapel. And in the context of this celebration weekend, with the inaugural festivities going on in our state, we are especially pleased to have so many special friends and guests with us this day. We welcome you, we hope that you will be inspired, and are glad that you are here with us on this very special day, for our service of elected officials. Some of you may already have heard the news, but I want to announce the very unexpected and untimely death last evening of Dr. Harry Levy, whose wife, Ernestine Friedle is dean of Trinity College. Dr. Levy died suddenly in his sleep last night. A memorial service for Dr. Levy will be held in the chapel this Wednesday, January 14 at three o'clock in the afternoon. For those who may be interested, the family has requested that no flowers be sent. Rather gifts may be given to the Duke Library.

- Let us pray. Oh Lord and lover of us all, cause the pure light of your divine knowledge to shine forth in our hearts. And open the eyes of our understanding, that we may comprehend the ways of your Gospel. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen. The Old Testament lesson is from Psalms chapter 84, verses one through five and 10 through 12. How lovely is thy dwelling place, oh Lord of hosts. My soul longs, ye faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young at thy alters, oh Lord of hosts, my king and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise, selah. Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee, and whose hearts are the highways to zion. Ye the Lord will give what is good and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way. Here ends the reading from the Old Testament. Amen. (soft music) (men singing) (women singing) Is from Matthew chapter 20, verses one through 16. For the kingdom of heaven is like a house holder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out, about the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.

And to them he said, you go into the vineyard too and whatever is right, I will give you. So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the 11th hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, because no one has hired us. He said to them, you go into the vineyard too. And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first. And when those hired about the 11th hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it, they grumbled at the house holder saying these last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne of the day and the scorching heat. But he replied to one of them, friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge by generosity. So the last will be first, and the first last. (organ music) (choir singing) Now the kingdom of heaven is like a householder. So Jesus begins one other of His parables about the kingdom of God. As one thinks about the parables that Jesus taught and left with us, one is reminded that most of the parables Jesus told have some semblance of touch with the real world in which he and his listeners lived. Most of the stories were so realistic and earthy and commonplace, that his listeners themselves, could've told them just as easily as he did. Most of the parables, as a matter of fact, are simply little vignettes out of the daily lives that He and His neighbors lived. The woman searching for the lost coin. The shepherd going the last mile to find his sheep. The father welcoming home his long lost younger son. The warning not to put a new patch on an old garment. The warning about the bride groom coming at an unknown time. But the parable which has been read for our scripture lesson for today is absolutely absurd. That is, it is absurd in the economic, the real, the psychological, the practical, the day to day world. It just does not make any sense. It's a kind of story that would wreak havoc with the AFL and the CIO. Or with the American Association of Manufacturers. The Chamber of Commerce would tell business, would never tell business that this is the way that wages are paid in our town. No business would say that this is the way its wages are paid by it. No government would dare to try to get either labor or management to operate on these principles. Most of Jesus' parables describe life as it works best in the everyday. But this one just will not work. The householder would go out of business. The early workers would be angry as they were in this story. The later workers would think that the owner was out of his head. This parable just will not work. But I'm glad that it does. For every time I read it, I am surprised by grace. I am surprised by the grace of God which does operate just like the householder operates in this story. Read, reflect, ponder, meditate. Consider any words, any story you will. There is no story in all of scripture or in literature that any more beautifully or personally or reassuringly tells me about the gift of life and the grace of God than this particular parable does. First of all, I am surprised by grace when I realize that life is a gift. An absolute free, unmerited, unearned, undeserved gift. The life of each of us is a gift, a gift from the source of life, even the Lord of life. That's what this parable tells me. We are here through the mercy, the love, the grace of the householder of all creation. And that says to me, my friends, that God needs us. James Weldon Johnson says it in his creation poem. God was lonely and God said I think I'll make me a man. And scripture says, "male and female created He them, "in the image of God, created He them." God wants us, needs us, created us, placed us here, now in this place, this time. You, me. Does that not surprise you? It does me. God cannot get along without us, without you or without me. It's like George Elliott describes in her poem on Antonio Stradivari, the maker of the famous Stradivarius violins. She tells how Antonio felt that while God

gave the great musicians music, he, Stradivari, gave the great musicians the violins. And then he reflects and says, if my hand slacked, I should rob God. He could not make Antonio Stradivarius violins without Antonio. And so God cannot, and that surprises me. Just as God needs us and places us in this here and now and in this place, you and I need a place. We need the marketplace, we need a vineyard, we need as Paul Torniay, the Swiss psychiatrist tells us, we need a place to stand and we have it. And that always surprises me. When I stop and realize that I am living in the here and now, in this marketplace called life, in this world, in today's vineyard, on this good earth with all its limitations and with all its possibilities. when I stop that I think that I am here, allowed to be, to do, to think, to grow, to create, to give, to help, to love, to serve, to care, to heal. I am surprised. When I pause and ponder, I am astonished at the grace of God, absolutely amazed. Just as amazed and surprised and pleased, as were the workers who were invited to go from the marketplace into the vineyard. Where you see, we not only need life we not only need to be alive and well and breathing. We need and want and long for life with a purpose. We need to hear somebody, some voice, some word say to us go and work in the vineyard. And so God speaks. And that always surprises me. I never hear God speak to me, and I hear that very infrequently. That is, if God just does not get through to me very often. But I never hear God speak to me, nor hear of God speaking to someone else. But what I am surprised, like Noah was. Like Abraham was. Like Moses was. Like Amos was. Like Paul was. Surprised by the grace of God. Thus, the third thing in this parable that makes me surprised about the grace of God is that God does call us. God needs us, that surprises me. God places us in this marketplace that is in life, and that surprises me. And then God calls us, and that surprises me even more. We not only need the marketplace, we not only need the vineyard. We need the householder to move us from the marketplace to the vineyard. God calls, in other words, and that always surprises me. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is one, who in the days of most of us, truly heard God call him from the marketplace to the vineyard. Dr. King, in one of his writings tells of an experience when he heard God call and he describes it something like this. "It happened on a night in January of 1956." And many of us can recall what the times of the middle '50s were like. Dr. King when to bed after he had had a long and trying day, but he could not fall asleep. A threatening telephone call came to him and it brought him to the saturation point of fear and anxiety. He reports that he got a pot of coffee, and he sat alone at his kitchen table. And then he writes. "In this state of exhaustion, "when my courage had all but gone, "I decided to take my problem to God. "With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table "and I prayed out loud. "The words I spoke to God that night are still "vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. "But now he said to God, I am afraid. "The people are looking to me for leadership "and if I stand before them without strength and courage, "they too will falter. "I am at the end of my powers. "I have nothing left. "I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." And at that point, Dr. King reports that he experienced the presence of the divine as he had never, ever before experienced the presence of God. "It seems", he writes, "as though I could hear the quiet "assurance of an inner voice saying to me, "stand up for righteousness. "Stand up for truth, "and God will be at your side forever. "Almost at once, he says, my fears began to go. "My uncertainty disappeared. "I was ready to face anything." God calls, God says to us, stand for righteousness, stand for truth, stand for goodness, stand for justice, stand for love and my friends, my child I will be by your side forever. And that grace always surprises me. The grace where God says, I will be by your side forever always surprises me. And so my dear friends, there is much to do in the vineyard, even yet. We have not by any means run out of work. We have not finished the tasks which God has called us to do. There are still human needs to be met. There are wrongs to be righted, hurts to be healed, justice to be done. Human dignity to be affirmed. We need to learn how to be together, to live

together and to love together. God calls us. And in order to do what God calls us to do, we need God's presence and strength and grace by our sides forever. It's like Peter Marshall. You remember who was chaplain in the US Senate for two years before his very sudden, tragic death. He prayed, one Wednesday in July of 1947. "Oh Lord of our lives, "will thou teach us true discrimination "that we may be able to discern the difference "between faith and fatalism. "Between activity and accomplishment. "Between humility and an inferiority complex. "Between a passing salute to God "and a real prayer that seeks to find out God's will. "We can stand criticism. "We can stand a certain amount of pressure. "But we cannot stand, oh God, the necessity "of making grave decisions with nothing "but our own poor human wisdom. "Our heads are not enough. "And our hearts fail us." And then Peter Marshall in this prayer says, "cabbage have heads, "but they have no souls. "We who are created in the image of God "are restless and unhappy until we know "that we are doing thy will, "by thy help." So there is one more thing in this strange parable. God needs us. God places us in the marketplace. God calls us. And then God gives us something to do. Our vocation, our calling. Something to be, to do, to serve, to labor in the vineyard, to be a part of God's mission and ministry in this day and in this time. And here, I believe, is where this particular parable affirms the ultimate significance of the individual human being in the eyes of God. Here the parable says that everyone who goes into the vineyard has ultimate worth. Here the parable says that all of us will be treated equally in God's vineyard. Here the parable says that we will all receive the same from God. All of us will receive the same from God, that is, we will receive the fullness of God's grace. Strange, isn't it? God needs us. God places us here. God calls us. God gives us something to do. God gives us life. And then God rewards us for living. No wonder I'm surprised by grace. And you? Laboring in the vineyard may sound like it is tough. It may seem very hard. But if we read this parable carefully we see what working in the vineyard is contrasted with. Working in the vineyard is seen to be in contrast with loitering or loafing or being idle in the marketplace. It is contrasted with standing idle in the marketplace all day, with being left alone, with not being called or not having heard the call. Or having ignored the call. It is contrasted with not counting for anything in the plan and purpose of God. Mind you, I do not believe that this is a blanket endorsement of the old American way, nor is it an endorsement of the protestant work ethic. This is simply to say that the hell of life is simply to loaf through life. Simply to stand and wait idly all the day. To stand in the marketplace all of one's life. Simply loafing. Totally oblivious and unresponsive to the needs and cries of God, and of other people. Simply waiting, just here, not seeing anything, not hearing anything, not doing anything, not being anything with purpose or meaning or hope. Just idle, all day long. This says to me, how important it is for us to be, how important it is to be in life, to be in the marketplace, to be in the vineyard. To be called to go into the vineyard. That, my friends, is affirming. It means that we're just not left alone. It means that we are not ignored. How important it is to be seen to be called to go and work in the vineyard. What a compliment. What grace, what goodness, what generosity. But it's too bad that we presume upon the greatest of God's love and grace, life and living, doing and being. How about reflecting for just a moment on who you are. How you live. And how you came to be where you are. Reflecting upon how very, very much of God's grace has been lavished on you already. Some people say about this parable, the late workers got a good deal. The early workers were cheated. They had a right to be angry. Not really. The tragic ones in this parable are not those who were called early in the morning and who worked all day in the vineyard. The tragic ones in this parable are those who stood idle in the marketplace all day. For you see, the longer the later workers waited in the marketplace, the more of life they wasted. The more hours the first workers spent in the vineyard, the more of the fullness of life they receive. They just did not realize it, and experience the fullness and the joy and the goodness of it as they

were living it. What we need to realize about life is that the work is the payment. The vocateo, the vocation, the calling is in and of itself the reward. The journeying is also the arriving. The living is the being. All of this, my friends, is to say to us that every child of God is of ultimate, ultimate worth. Every one of us. And every one of the almost four billion persons who live on this earth. And so I close by sharing some words from a little book entitled The Way of the Wolf. In one of Martin Bell's writings entitled Wood and Nails and Colored Eggs. This one is entitled Wood. "Something like an eternity ago, "human beings got all caught up in the illusion "that being human is a relatively unimportant "sort of proposition. "Here today, gone tomorrow. "A veil of tears, that sort of foolishness. "What's more tragic, of course, is that "in the wake of this basic error, "there quickly followed the idea that human beings "are expendable, which easily generated into the proposition "that some human beings are expendable, "certain human beings are expendable, "really bad guys are expendable. "Guys with low IQs are expendable. "Anyone who disagrees with me is expendable. "A long time ago, human beings got all caught up "in the illusion that being human is a relatively "unimportant sort of proposition. "Well that's not true. "It's wrong, all wrong and it has always been wrong. "From the creation of the heavens and the earth, "it has been wrong. "There is nothing more important than being human. "Our lives have eternal significance. "And no one, "absolutely no one, "is expendable." God says to you and to me, every one of us is of ultimate, ultimate importance. And no one, absolutely no one is expendable" That always surprises me. Amen. (soft music) (choir singing)

- Let us affirm what we believe. We believe in God, who has created and is creating. Who has come in the truly human Jesus to reconcile and make new. Who works in us and others by the spirit. We trust God, who calls us to be the church. To celebrate life and its fullness. To love and serve others. To seek justice and resist evil. To proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, our judge and our hope in life and death, in life beyond death. God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God. The Lord be with you.

- And with you.

- Let us pray. Oh God, spirit of justice and truth, we pause now in the busyness of life to think before you our thoughts about where we are going and what we are doing with the opportunities given to us each day. Opportunities to become what it is possible to be under your plan. To fulfill the promise and potential, to rise to the noblest of your creation. Through all of our busyness, make us appreciative of the life affirming way that is right. And help turn us from the life denying customs and attitudes, which are wrong. Help us, oh God, to see that nothing we do is insignificant. You who are our maker and our judge. That in every act of life, great and small, we either think and do right and affirm life. Or our thinking and doing is certainly out of harmony with the best. And is contrary to your plan of creation. In this time of prayer, we confess that no relationship with other people is trivial or unimportant. That in every relationship of life we are given the opportunity to practice the perfect way that Christ exemplified. Or we find ourselves yielding to temptation to demean persons by using them or ignoring them. Save us from these spiritual pitfalls and guide us into the higher way of life in which Christ is indeed our Lord, we pray. Now let us join together in a prayer for sound government. Oh Lord our governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to there nations of the earth. (congregation speaking) To the president elect and members of the cabinet, to the governor of our state, mayors of cities, and to all in administrative authority, grant wisdom and grace in the exercise of their duties. (congregation speaking) To senators and

representatives, and those who make our laws in states, cities, and towns give courage, wisdom and foresight to provide for the needs of all our people, and to fulfill our obligations in the community of nations. (congregation speaking) To the judges and officers of our courts, give understanding and integrity that human rights may be safeguarded and justice served. (congregation speaking) And finally, teach our people to rely on your strength, to accept their responsibilities to their fellow citizens. That their leaders may be good servants of Jesus Christ, trustworthy stewards of His justice and grace. And constant examples of His love and mercy. May we place no other duty above obedience to your divine law, that we may serve you faithfully in our generation and honor your holy name. (congregation speaking) Let us pray the prayer that Jesus taught us saying, our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen. (soft music) (choir singing) (organ music) ♪ Praise God from whom all blessings flow ♪ ♪ Praise Him all creatures here below ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ Praise Him above ye heavenly host ♪ ♪ Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ You have called us, oh Lord, and we shall answer. Use us now to fulfill your ministry as we offer ourselves and our gifts to share in your great works, amen.

- Will you join with me now as we pray responsively. Our covenant of commitment to God and to one another. We have heard God's word read and proclaimed. In the company of God's people and in the presence of God, how are we to respond with the life and the hope that are ours? What does the Lord require of us? We will love God with all our hearts, our minds, our souls, our strength. We will place no other gods or false images above the worship of the one true God we know as Jesus Christ. We will love as God has loved us because He has loved us, not considering our own merit or other's worthiness. But sacrificing our desires for the sake of other's need. We will love our neighbors as ourselves. After the example of our Lord, we will count no cost too high when feeding the hungry. Clothing the poor. Healing the sick. Welcoming the stranger. We will do justice, not with the easy word, but in the difficult deed. We will love mercy. Not with idle sentiment, but in sacrificial giving. We will walk humbly, not with the trappings of privilege but in the fear of responsibility. We will perform our civil service as divine worship. As public servant or private citizen, we will live our lives before God and we pledge our allegiance to His Christ, our Lord. God is witness to our words. May our confession be found in the faithfulness of our lives, amen. ("Battle Hymn of the Republic")

- We go forth recalling that we are loved, forgiven, renewed, and never to be the same again. Go forth now with faith to share this with others. ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ (organ music) (crowd chattering)