

God's Monopoly: The First and Last

Matthew 20: 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o'clock 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 when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden 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 the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Remember Monopoly? Good game on a rainy day. Loong game. Remember collecting \$200 as you pass go from the top hat banker. Remember “Get Out of Jail Free” Cards. Remember the point? Try to acquire as many properties as possible so that when someone lands on your space they pay up. The game is simple enough. But imagine you get a late start on the game. Most of the properties are taken and it is impossible to establish any kind of wealth since all that is left are the less lucrative squares on the board. It's unfair, right? On the other hand, imagine you are the one who acquired all the properties. Except now one of the rules is that when someone new starts the game, we are expected to equalize the playing field by giving away half of our properties. It also feels a bit unfair. After all, moralism says we've worked hard to acquire and manage them. But it's the scenario Jesus paints in the parable. Some start early, some start later. Some work longer hours, some less. But at the end, all get paid the same. “Not fair,” the all-day workers say. They're right. But perhaps the parable is a bit different than we have traditionally understood it.

Start by placing the parable in context. After all, Jesus' parables are always responding to a situation. Travel back a few verses and we've landed on the rich person who asks, “What do I have to do to live inside of God's realm?” After establishing that this rich person is devout and follows the commandments Jesus says, “Well, if you are striving for perfection—which it sounds like you are—go sell your possessions, give the cash to the poor, for you will have treasures in heaven.” We know the story: the rich guy walks away because *it is easier for a camel to squeeze*

through an eye of a needle than the rich to enter the kingdom. Except, the disciples are greatly disturbed by this, “Who can be saved?” For God all things are possible. But Peter follows up: “Look, we’ve left everything, what’s the reward system like for us?” Then Jesus tells the parable as a response to the question about *their reward*.

It's a natural curiosity. After all, we are driven by what's in it for us, aren't we? Ever since we were children, we understood that good behavior means we get something in return. Ask our kiddos what will get them motivated and they might say a bit more tablet time. Ask an adult and we'd probably say a bigger paycheck or early retirement. How many times have we heard: have a good work ethic, pay our dues, and then we earn our slice of the pie. The harder we work the bigger the slice. We make the reward about moralism. And as we hear Jesus talking about the last being first and the first being last, we might naturally find ourselves wondering where we are on the scale. Maybe we see ourselves as closer to the first. Like white comedian Jim Gaffigan once joked, “I know the reckoning is coming where white guys like me are going to fall straight down to the bottom. But in the meantime, wee!” Or maybe we think we are the last and so we hear the good news that the reward is finally coming! But it all makes the parable about moralism, doesn't it? Because the payout is our motivator. Like Peter, we want to know what the reward system looks like for us.

But here comes the twist! In our bibles we read Jesus saying, “The last will be first, and the first will be last.” It sounds like a great reversal in God's kingdom! Except, that verse is actually a mistranslation into English. In the Greek it says, “All will be the last firsts and the first lasts.” You see, all of us are sometimes last; and of us are sometimes first; and sometimes we are snug in the middle depending on what it is. Some of us felt a calling since we were young. Others are new arrivals. Different things have opened up for us at different times in our lives. With some things we started early and have been at the work awhile. With other things, we arrived late to the party and we are just getting started. We are all first lasts and last firsts, because all of our autobiographies are unique. You see, Peter wants to know his reward for leaving his life behind and following Jesus—for putting in the hours of ministry, for working hard to reshape his life and priorities. But he does so by comparing himself to the rich guy who couldn't sell everything and follow. And so, Jesus tells this parable where the early comers and the late comers both receive the same reward. Well, so who is the late comer in the story? It's the rich guy! And who are the ones who complain? The disciples! It's the twist we weren't expecting! All are last firsts and first lasts. All inherit the good news in different ways, through different processes, during different times, depending on what's going on in our lives. And it is this kind of space and grace which, for God, makes all things possible.

Well, you know what this means? It means we can stop comparing ourselves to other people. We can let go of judgement for what we are or what we aren't. Whether it's body image, or a career, or even our faith journey. You see, since we are all first lasters and last firsters, we can't get caught up in the jealousy of what is given to others. God is generous to everyone. The problem becomes when we get caught up in the comparison game. Notice: all the workers are in the project together. Some started early, others late. And the rivalry doesn't show up until the all-day workers make the comparison. And what does it do? It destroys their imaginations for what they've been given, and they are no longer grateful for what they have.

Except, since we are all last firsters and first lasters, we can let go of the comparisons and see all of our contemporaries, our siblings, or even our enemies as both first and last in different aspects of their lives and it frees us from the jealousy game. Jesus isn't turning our society upside down—which only creates a new hierarchy—Jesus is trying to address the rivalistic Monopoly game which our economies and relationships are consistently based on.

So Trinity, please know that you are pretty great just as you are. Room for growth? Of course! Perfect? No. Close to perfect? Well, maybe! But what makes us...well, us, we that we know we aren't First Church. We know we aren't Second Church. We know we aren't even Third Church. But we do us pretty well. Which happens to be all we can be as we continue to do the work we've been called to do!

And the reward? The reward is being able to relax securely into our faith as last firsters and first lasters. The reward is an imagination full of compassion for ourselves and others when we are tempted to play the comparison game. The reward is celebrating and enjoying the gifts we have been given together. Which, by the way, has always been ours whether we've been the first or the last to realize it.