

THE FIRST WILL BE LAST

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2020

The landowner replied, "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. (Matthew 20:15-16)

Flannery O'Connor is widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers. She died in 1964 at only 39 years of age, and the complex tension between her work and her person is still being debated. One of her short stories is entitled *Revelation*, and she must have had the parables of Jesus in mind when she wrote it, including the parable we heard today.

The main character in *Revelation* is Mrs. Ruby Turpin, a stout, proper woman in the segregated south who, with her husband, Claud, is a dairy farmer. The story opens in a doctor's waiting room, and as we listen in on Mrs. Turpin's thoughts, we learn how insufferably pleased with herself she is; she trusts in herself that she is righteous, and regards others with contempt. She judges everyone she sees, sorting people by race and class, finding all but a few to be morally and socially inferior to herself. As she chats with a like-mannered woman nearby, she gives thanks to Jesus for placing her among the first and finest in God's kingdom: "*Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different! Oh, thank you, Jesus, Jesus thank you!*"

Meanwhile, an unattractive college girl with a bad complexion and a weight problem keeps looking up from a thick text book she is trying to read and glares at Mrs. Turpin with deadly rage and spite. Suddenly, just as Mrs. Turpin finishes her prayer of gratitude, the girl throws the book with all her might, striking the self-righteous woman just above the left eye. Then she lunges across the room and sinks her fingers into the flesh of Mrs. Turpin's neck, as if to choke the life out of her. Finally the girl locks eyes with her target and says, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Others in the waiting room are finally able to pull the girl off of Mrs. Turpin, who is understandably rattled. But Mrs. Turpin is not so lost as to miss that the girl's attack was a message from God. The first part of the revelation to Mrs. Turpin is that not everyone would place her first in line. Not everyone thinks as highly of her as she thinks of herself.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew comes at us like the attack on Mrs. Turpin. It is a book that hits us in the head. It is a hand that seizes us by the throat. We don't like it at all, but suspect that it may be a message from God we need to hear. A certain landowner, ready to harvest the grapes from his vineyard, goes to the market place to hire anyone who wants to work. In those days the workday began at six in the morning, and lasted until six in the evening. So at 6 am, the landowner hires on a few laborers, and agrees to pay them the usual daily wage: one denarius. Then for some reason, he goes back to the market place at 9 am and hires on more laborers, agreeing to pay them "whatever is right." He does the same thing at noon, and again at 3:00 in the afternoon. Finally at 5:00 p.m., with one hour left in the working day, he hires on still more laborers.

At the end of the day everyone lines up to get paid. Strangely, the workers hired on only an hour earlier receive a full day's wage – the wage agreed upon by the earliest laborers. Those further back in line think to themselves, "Great! The landowner is paying a denarius an hour." Not so. Everyone receives one denarius, from the earliest laborer in the field, all the way to the last. The early workers are indignant: "*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.” You heard how the landowner replied: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last as I gave 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.

We hear the same sort of indignation in today’s Old Testament reading from Jonah. Jonah believed that he and the Jewish people had been laboring under the law, struggling to be a holy people, and thus stood first in line for God’s blessings. Meanwhile, the nearby Ninevites couldn’t have cared less about that kind of nonsense. But when God warned them to repent, they did it immediately. At the last minute God spared them all. Jonah was indignant. God was supposed to clobber the Ninevites. Jonah had set up a lawn chair outside the city to watch (Jonah 4:5). But listen to what God tells Jonah: *Should not I pity Ninevah, that great city in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?*

Once again, God has a rude revelation for the self-righteous and satisfied. We can see the comic elements in the message delivered to Jonah and Mrs. Turpin. But the early workers in the vineyard? It’s not funny. We don’t like it when the vineyard owner pays everyone the same amount. It isn’t fair. And it’s no way to run a vineyard. “Good luck tomorrow hiring anyone at 6 am to pick the grapes,” is what we would say to the landowner. You see, when word gets around that the pay is the same no matter how long you work, no one will be willing to put in a twelve-hour day. The landowner has eliminated the motivation to work hard. The grapes will rot on the vine, the landowner won’t even cover the costs, and soon the whole vineyard will fail. A failed business benefits no one: not those who have invested resources in it, and not those who see it as a place to strive and get ahead. Competition within the vineyard, and competition between the vineyards drives innovation and excellence.

What would happen today, for example, if laws were passed decreeing that the pharmaceutical firms racing to develop a coronavirus vaccine would all be paid the same regardless of whose worked and whose did not? Do you think such laws would help or hinder the process? Many would argue that with all profit motive removed, the race would slow to a crawl, and fewer firms would bother running it at all. Companies that falter produce no goods and employ no one. Everyone loses. Thus, we look at the parable of the laborers in the vineyard through an economic lens and bristle. It’s just not the way business works, and it’s certainly not the way of human nature. It’s human nature to expect proper compensation or reward for a hard day’s work. People want to get and stay ahead.

Jesus might ask, “Ahead of whom?” To this question the only response could be, “Well, ahead of the others.” As soon as you say the words or think the thoughts you’d better duck, because here comes the parable – a message from God flying at your head. This brings me back to Mrs. Turpin, who fancied herself to be ahead of others in line. Strangely, she turns out to be a more complex character than we actually want her to be. Yes, she gets what is coming to her. But she’s also discerning enough to know that God himself spoke to her through the girl’s assault. Later in the day while back at the farm tending the pigs, she argues with God: “What do you send me a message like that for? How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” On and on she contends with God demanding an answer.

Finally, there in the pig pen – the same place, by the way, where the prodigal son came to his senses – Mrs. Turpin receives the completion of the revelation intended to save her soul. She looks up and sees in the clouds a vision of a bridge extending upward from earth. *“Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven.”* At the head of the procession were all the races and classes and sorts and conditions of people that Mrs. Turpin had judged as unfit and of little

worth. They were shouting and clapping and leaping for joy. *“And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those ... like herself. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”* The good news for Mrs. Turpin is that yes, she’s going to heaven. The troubling news is that so is everybody else, many of whom ahead her. How did Jesus end the parable? *“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

As Mrs. Turpin heads back to the house, night is beginning to fall and the chorus of crickets has begun chirping in the woods. O’Connor’s final sentence of the story is as follows: *“But what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”* The suggestion here is that the woods, and the crickets, and the pigs, and the people, and the farm, and all and of creation is intended to participate in God’s purposes. What is God’s purpose? Recall the response of the landowner to one of the indignant early workers: *“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”* God’s purpose is generosity. It is to give – primarily to give life. Apparently, the landowner looks at his vineyard not through the economic, competitive lens, but through the lens of the kingdom. Through the lens of the kingdom he sees the purpose of the vineyard as an arena to express his generosity. So the parable can challenge us to rethink the very purpose of our lives. We can choose to look at life through the lens of the kingdom and find opportunities to express generosity. The purpose of this voyage is not to get ahead and stay ahead. God’s mission is to be generous and get everyone home.

True revelations often don’t come easily, and they can be unpleasant in their delivery, as the early workers, and Jonah, and Mrs. Turpin discovered. But perhaps none of these do it for you. Therefore, I’ve been wondering how this parable would sound if we lifted it out of the business model and let it play in a different setting. Would we be better able to hear it?

Imagine this: You are on a sinking ship that goes down leaving hundreds of survivors in the water. Some are crowded into lifeboats. Some are clinging to wreckage. Most are flailing about with only a lifejacket to keep them afloat. Finally a rescue ship appears on the horizon and pulls close to the tangled mass of humanity in the water. The small crew begins dropping lines and rope ladders, hauling some to safety and encouraging others to climb. You happen to be among the first plucked out of the sea. Because the task at hand is enormous, you and the other able-bodied early survivors are pressed into service, helping to pull others onto the ship. The more who come aboard the more hands on deck are available to help. Even still, it is exhausting work that takes many hours. Finally the few remaining survivors are found, frightened and nearly frozen to death. Once they are aboard the captain orders the ship to head for the nearest port.

Now imagine this: as the ship is steaming to shore, you and some of the other survivors who were the first out of the sea grumble at the captain and say, *These last to be pulled out of the water didn’t participate in the rescue effort at all, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the freezing wind. How dare you take them home at the same time as us!* As absurd as it sounds, it is essentially how the early workers grumbled at the laborer, and how some people grumble though life: envious because the Captain of souls is generous.

I like to think that not even in the worst moment of my worst day would it ever dawn on me to speak such words of indignation to the captain. I like to think that instead of indignation, you and I would join our voices with the souls sailing homeward under the starry field and shouting hallelujah.