

The Bible is full of reversals and in our Gospel passage today, we will look at one of the primary themes found in the New Testament: “The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Let us pray:

Holy God, your ways are not our ways. Your kingdom is not of this world and yet you called us into this world to live, love, and serve. Open our ears to hear you speak through your Word, and open our hearts to be continually transformed into newness of life in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

To make fuller sense of the theme of “firsts and lasts” in Matthew 20 we need to look to the end of Matthew 19. There Jesus reassures the disciples that their sacrificial work will be rewarded in heaven, and he extends this assurance to all those who have lived sacrificial lives for His “name’s sake” (19:29). He ends his teaching with the same line as our passage begins with today, “But many who are first will be last and the last will be first (19:30).”

There is much going on in the parable of the “Laborers in the Vineyard”. The vineyard represents God’s eternal Kingdom, a theme that reoccurs throughout Matthew. In the parable we see that there are laborers who are hired at different intervals throughout the day leading up to some who are hired at the very last hour. These laborers could be understood to include past followers of God who have anticipated the coming of the Messiah and all present and future followers of Jesus. Many scholars believe those who were hired last represent the inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s Kingdom; a people who were considered the some of “last” in the Jewish social strata of Jesus’s time. Remember, until Pentecost and even many years afterwards, “The Way” of Jesus was largely a Jewish phenomenon. In this parable, we see that all who are hired, are paid by the landowner, whom we understand to represent God, and the payment is the promise of eternal life.

Each worker is paid the same amount no matter when they began, and this is where the tension in the parable begins! The workers who were hired earlier think that the landowner is

unfair. The workers “grumbled” and said “you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (20:12). The landowner replies, “*Friend*, I am doing you no wrong... Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20: 13-16). So the first will be last and the last will be first

This language of “grumbled” and “burdened” and the imagery of the scorching sun reminds us of the Israelite journey through the desert from our Old Testament reading (in Exodus 16) today when the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron, and God heard their complaining and provided them with Quail and Manna. The Landowner’s response also echoes the familiar Old Testament attribute of God’s grace and mercy (from Exodus 33:11 and 19) when God spoke to Moses as a “friend” (33:11) and said, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and show compassion on whom I show compassion.” (33:19) Here, Matthew is indicating to his largely Jewish audience and to us, that this landowner is the same God of their ancestors, who is merciful and gracious and who calls his followers, *friend*.

By telling this parable, Jesus the Good shepherd is preparing his disciples for many things. He is preparing them for the fullness of his Kingdom that will eventually encompass people from every tribe and nation (Rev. 7:9). Jesus is saying that all are welcome. He is also preparing them for his own great reversal of “firsts and lasts”: his death and resurrection, which he foretells in the very next section in Matthew. We also know that this parable of “first and lasts” will prepare the disciples for their life of persecution: “The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Why is this parable important to us? Today, as modern- day disciples, we can relate to the workers who are hired throughout the day as paralleling our own faith stories. Some of us have

been serving in God's vineyard for many decades, while others of us are new and full of excitement to serve with vigor, and others are still yet to come. The reversal of "firsts and lasts" not only helps us understand God's kingdom, it also helps us understand ourselves, it puts our own lives in perspective. Paul writes in our Epistle today: "Living is Christ, and dying is gain (Phillipians 1:21)". What are we living for? Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also". Like the laborers who so desperately needed their day's wage for daily food, we too can get focused on our own needs and lose sight of our relationship with God, and our relationship with friends, neighbors, and strangers. In this parable, Jesus not only assures us that our spiritual needs will be met, but our daily needs will be met also. With that assurance in mind, we too can afford to be generous to each other and to those yet to come. Just like the generous landowner, we too must call one another, *friend* and make room in God's vineyard.

So, who are you in this story? Burdened and scorched, newly joined into God's Kingdom, or somewhere in the middle? What "firsts and lasts" need to shift in your life today? Who do you see who has not yet joined the wide and glorious field of God's Kingdom, and how will you welcome them? If you find yourself grumbling and complaining, what will you do to allow the Holy Spirit to refresh you and rekindle the joy of your salvation? We are citizens of God's eternal Kingdom here on earth, and we work and worship under a different set of rules: "Living is Christ, and dying is gain"... "The last will be first, and the first will be last." While life in God's kingdom is not always easy, and God's ways are not are not our ways. Let us not forget, God is generous, the Holy Spirit sees and responds to our earthly and spiritual needs, and Jesus calls us *friend*. Amen.