

FIRST AND LAST

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2014
First Presbyterian Church of Marianna
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

MATTHEW 20:1-16

I say it all the time. Hardly a Wednesday evening passes that I don't utter the words. I must have said them three times at the Synod meeting Polly and I attended this week.. It usually happens that I'm standing around, waiting to take my usual place at the end of the chow line. I always go last. It is tradition. There are some reasons for it, like being able to load up my plate without fear of depriving anyone else, like putting God to the test to see if there really will be a piece of pecan pie left, like knowing that when I'm finished eating, everyone else should be too so we can start the program.

But week in and week out, the words, "The last will be first, and the first will be last" get spoken.

I remember several years ago, using this text for a Wednesday evening youth Bible study. One of the young men who was there was outraged. "That's not right!" he said. "If you work all day, you should get paid more than those who have only worked an hour!"

"But they all got what they bargained for...nobody was shortchanged," I argued.

"But if you did more you should get more, if you worked longer, then you should get paid more."

I'm not sure he ever understood that the point of the parable is the all-exceeding generosity of God. And I think the young fellow missed out on the fact that this isn't a parable about labor relations, it is a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

This is another one of those where Jesus is attempting to answer the question: "What's heaven like?"

And the answer here is that those who answer the call of the kingdom of God will be generously and amply rewarded when the final accounting is made.

It doesn't matter when one signs on, early in life or late: the reward at the time of reckoning is the same.

Now this concept raises some interesting questions. The church, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, in all ages, has recognized "death bed confessions." Is a death bed profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and savior sufficient to

gain entry into heaven? Well, this parable would certainly say so, and who are we to contradict it?

We are told, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." (Acts 16:31) It doesn't say how long one has to believe, does it? (But the scripture also says that not every one who cries out, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

There is a tension there, isn't there? I'm glad that it is God who is to decide, that I don't have to decide who goes to heaven and who doesn't. It's like that old definition of God's grace and God's mercy that I picked up off the liner on a Garth Brooks album a few years back. It goes something like: "God's grace is when we get what we don't deserve. God's mercy is when we don't get what we do deserve." Now in addition to grace and mercy, God has justice as well. And I wouldn't attempt to define God's justice, except to say that God's justice and our justice are not the same, and God's judgment is final.

A classic case that puts God's justice, grace, and mercy in tension has got to be that of the serial killer Ted Bundy. It has been more than a quarter of a century since he was executed at the Florida Correctional Institution at Starke. During his last days, he met with the Christian television personality James Dobson, and taped interviews from that time still are broadcast. His last night on earth was spent in prayer with a minister from Gainesville. This man raped and murdered at least 18 and maybe as many as 100 women, terrorized two states, and yet, at the end of his life, he confessed his sins, and professed his faith. At least according to James Dobson.

Does that mean Ted Bundy gets into heaven?

Only God knows.

I'm comfortable living with that tension. I'm comfortable trusting in God. I don't understand how God works things like that out.

But I am grateful that God is generous. I am grateful that God is compassionate. I am grateful that God is merciful and gracious.

And I am grateful that God is in control, even though it seems as though things are out of control.

Now I'm going to confess a sin or two to you all this morning. There are times when I feel a little like those folks who were hired early in the morning..

I went to seminary straight out of college. I was ordained to the ministry of the word and sacrament before I was 25 years old. I have been serving the Lord in small-town churches for over four decades. There are times, when I see people younger than me, in other fields of endeavor, like the military, or business, or government service, retired, enjoying retirement, on a good pension, when I grumble a little. I thought I'd retired about three years ago. I'm working harder now and doing more than I was ten years ago. But I didn't sign on for the short haul. I'm one of the ones who came out in the morning and said I'd work all day. From can see to can't see, like the field hands used to say, from daylight to dark.

I used to resent those who came into the ministry from other careers (business, industry, government service) and got the calls to bigger churches in bigger cities, for more money, than some of us who had been faithfully plugging along for years.

But I now know that God is faithful, and that for those of us who serve God, the benefits are literally out of this world!

And I'm not talking about preachers and missionaries and educators and other church professionals, I'm talking about all of us who bear the name Christian, and who answer the call to service in the kingdom in any and every way.

That reward is yours as well, and it is the same for all who hear and heed the call to come work in the vineyard. Truly, the harvest is great, but the laborers are few.

Let us pray.

O Lord, forgive us when we grumble and complain. Whether we sign on at the last hour, or serve you the whole day long, make us faithful and diligent in our service. Forgive us and bless us, until we reach our final reward in your kingdom of heaven which surely awaits us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.