

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “Scrambling to Be First” (Matthew 20:1-16)**

**September 18, 2011**

One of my favorite teachers in elementary school was my third grade teacher, Mrs. Stevens, an “old school” teacher who maintained a strict sense of order in class but who genuinely cared about each of us. On the first day of school she asked us to line up for lunch and there was a mad scramble to get to the front of the line. After we had lined up, Mrs. Stevens went to the back of the line, smiled and said, “This is the front of the line,” and led the class to lunch. I still remember the surprised grin on the face of the kid who suddenly found herself in the front of the line, as well as the angry response from someone at the back of the line: “This is *so* annoying!”

The next day when we lined up for lunch we all scrambled to be last in line, so Mrs. Stevens went to the middle of the line and said, “Today this is the front of the line.” Eventually we all got the message and the scrambling to be first stopped.

Today’s gospel lesson, the Parable of the Landowner, is unsettling on the surface for many people, and for some people their response to this parable is the same as that of the kid in the back of the line: “This is *so* annoying!”

This parable can indeed be annoying because when it comes to merit, to getting what you’ve earned “thank-you-very-much,” it turns everything upside down. The grace the landowner demonstrates in this parable is the opposite of what Jesus’ hearers, and we, would expect. One scholar aptly refers to this parable as “The Parable of the Eccentric Employer” ☺.

We live in a world in which people scramble to be first all the time: kids in elementary school scrambling to be first in the lunch line, high school students scrambling to be in the top ten percent of their class, college students scrambling to get into a certain fraternity or sorority, employees scrambling for promotions, parents scrambling to get their kids ahead. Every day as I drive down Route 29 on the way here I find myself scrambling in traffic—that of course is one of the areas in my life where my “Christ-like character” is most apparent. I’ve even heard that

people scramble to find parking here on Sundays ☺. In the world we live in the scrambling to be first never stops. It goes on and on and on.

But in the kingdom of heaven it is different. In the kingdom of heaven scrambling to be first doesn't work.

In this parable Jesus talks about a landowner who needs workers for his vineyard and one day goes into town multiple times and hires workers for his vineyard. Some work all day, others half a day, others a quarter of a day and still others for just one hour. At the end of the day the landowner does two things that reveal his grace. First, he pays the last people he hired—those who only worked an hour—before anyone else; second, he pays them a full days' wages. He then proceeds to pay everyone else the exact same amount, including those who had worked all day long.

While apparently those who worked less than a full day responded gratefully by accepting the grace of the landowner and going on their merry way, there was an angry, visceral response by those who were paid last. Jesus says, "They grumbled against the landowner" and complained to his face, "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." These grumbling workers were angry and entitled.

Listen to how the landowner responds to one of them, perhaps the unofficial leader of the group:

"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 the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

In addressing this worker as "Friend" it appears that the landowner is being kind and patient, but the Greek word used here for friend is only used two other times in the entire New Testament: once in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet when a man without the proper garments was thrown out of a wedding ("Friend, how did you get in without a wedding robe?"—Matthew 22:12) and the other when Jesus addressed Judas at the moment of his betrayal ("Friend, do what you are here to do"—Matthew 26:50). In other words, the word "friend" in this parable is used

not as a compliment, but a rebuke. In all three occurrences of this word in the New Testament, “friend” refers to someone who is opposed to the grace of God.

The landowner continues by emphasizing that he pays according to his own choice, not the entitlement of the angry laborer: “*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?”

But the angry entitled laborers were more concerned about their rank than anything else. Listen again to what their representative said: “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.” (Talk about a martyr complex ☺).

The angry entitled laborers felt they outranked those who had only worked for an hour, and were furious with the idea of being viewed as equal by the landowner. They were preoccupied with rank and opposed to grace.

Sometimes it is the same with us. We too can be preoccupied with rank and opposed to God’s grace. But the truth is that in God’s eyes we are all sinners in need of grace; no one outranks anyone else. We are all in the same boat.

One spring in the late 90’s when I was serving as a youth minister in South Carolina I took some high school students on a canoe trip. We picked up our canoes early in the morning and received “training” in the form of a five-minute video on a fuzzy TV followed by a few mumbled instructions from the staff. We loaded our canoes and started down the river. About an hour into the trip the current became noticeably stronger. There had been a lot of rain over the winter and spring and while there were many trees on either side of the river, there was no shore; the high water covered the Lowcountry as far as you could see.

The kids in one of our canoes ventured too close to the trees and got pinned against them by the strong current. The groups in our other two canoes paddled toward them to help out and we all ended up pinned against the trees by the current. We spent perhaps an hour trying to unpin the canoes, but with no land where we could stand or unload, and with no way to overcome the strong current, we realized it was impossible for us. We were in the middle of nowhere in the pre-cell phone era with no way to contact anyone for help. One of the kids asked me, “What do we do now?” Good question.

We ended up abandoning the canoes and with our life-vests on, we held onto one another and floated down the river together. The water was very dark and one of the kids said, “I’m petrified of snakes—there aren’t any snakes around here, right?” So I did what any youth minister would do in that situation, I lied ☺. “Right,” I grinned, “No snakes.”

For a couple hours we floated down the river as a clump of refugees, holding onto one another’s life vests, at the mercy of the current, with no land in sight. We were all in the same situation—the smart kids and the clueless kids, the athletic and non-athletic kids, the leaders with lots of wilderness experience and the coach potatoes who preferred air-conditioning—all of us were equally in need of help.

Finally we came to a place where there was actually a bank, and we got out of the river and hiked until we found a road and eventually flagged down some help. At the end of the day we were all fine, and for years after that the kids on that trip laughed with me about it.

When it comes to being sinners in need of God’s grace, we are all in, or out ☺, of the same boat. We are all floating helplessly wherever the dark current of our sinful desires take us, with no place to get out. In that situation there was no scrambling to be first, and no one outranked anyone else.

And yet this parable is so counter-intuitive, so different from what we are used to. We are often just like the angry entitled workers in this parable: preoccupied with rank, scrambling to be first. Even in the church people often find this parable to be quite annoying.

But in the kingdom of heaven God’s grace supersedes all scrambling to be first, all entitlement, all rank—as the Anglican bishop and scholar Michael Green puts it: “All human merit shrivels before (God’s) burning, self-giving love. Grace, amazing grace, is the burden of this story... There are no rankings in the kingdom of God” (*The Message of Matthew*, p. 212).

When I went through the process for ordination over ten years ago I spent hours on my spiritual autobiography, I took a battery of psychological and personality tests, I did all sorts of reading and preparing for the questions I would be asked by various committees over the course of the process, I jumped through hoop after

hoop. But there was one question that I was asked during one interview that undermined all my preparation, that undermined any sense of entitlement I had going into the process. And the question was this: “What is the greatest failure in your life and how did you experience God’s grace in that?”

I was completely caught off guard by that question because frankly I still had a very narrow view of God’s grace at that point in my life. I had yet to learn the importance of getting over yourself because everyone else has ☺. I had yet to learn that the church is not a club for self-righteous superstars but a fellowship of failures who have experienced, and continue to experience, God’s grace.

And I’m not alone, for many of us still want to cling to our sense of entitlement and rank. Shaking it off is like trying to shake off a spider web we’ve walked into, and we don’t really want to shake it off anyway. But, again, in the kingdom of heaven God’s grace supersedes all scrambling to be first, all entitlement, all rank. In his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning describes this:

“The gospel of grace... obliterates the two-class citizenship theory operative in many American churches. For grace proclaims the awesome truth that all is gift. All that is good is ours, not by right, but by the sheer bounty of a gracious God... Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual but for the wobbly and the weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together, and who are not too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace” (p. 25 and 28).

Arguably one of the greatest American short story writers is the late Flannery O’Connor. In a letter she once described the main theme of her stories, grace. “Part of the difficulty,” she wrote, “is that you write for an audience who doesn't know what grace is and doesn't recognize it when they see it. All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it.”

O’Connor was only thirty-nine when she died of Lupus. Toward the end of her life as her suffering increased she wrote a short story entitled *Revelation*, in which she describes Ruby Turpin, a smug self-righteous southern woman who experiences grace, but as a “character who is not very willing to support it.” Near the end of the story Ruby has the following vision:

“She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives... and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself... had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right... They were marching behind the others with great dignity... yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away... In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting Hallelujah.”

In this vision the smug Ruby Turpin found herself at the end of the line, behind the white trash, behind the freaks, behind the lunatics—not unlike the angry entitled laborers found themselves at the end of the line behind those who had not borne the heat of the day. In the kingdom of heaven scrambling for first doesn't work.

The “annoying” Parable of the Landowner reveals the good news of the gospel, that God is a gracious God, that he has the power to give his grace however and to whomever he chooses and that he has chosen to give his grace to you and me, especially in the areas of our greatest failure.

Out of unstoppable love for us Jesus Christ was swept by the current of our sin and pinned to the cross where he died for all of us: those who have borne the heat of the day as well as those who work for only one hour, the angry and entitled “friends” who oppose the grace of God as well as “the wobbly and the weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together,” those who welcome God's grace as well as “characters who are not very willing to support it.”

In the kingdom of heaven the first will be last and the last will be first. God's grace supersedes all scrambling to be first, all entitlement, all rank because Jesus Christ is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, who died on the cross for all of us, and who even now, in the midst of the scrambling in our lives, offers his grace to us anew. God is the “eccentric employer” who offers his grace freely to us, the fellowship of failures. And because of the abundant grace God has given us

we will one day join Ruby Turpin and the “clapping and leaping” throngs  
“climbing upward into the starry field and shouting Hallelujah.” Amen.