

16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 20th, 2020

“From last to first - by grace alone!” (Matthew 20:16)
By Rev. Ed Weber

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
Today’s text is from our Gospel reading, Matthew 20:16

“So, the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

Here ends our text.

In the sports world, the worst to first team turnarounds capture our attention. Even if you’re not a fan of the team, you have to admire the effort, skill and dedication that turned a bottom dweller into a champion. One example you might remember was the 1991 Minnesota Twins. In 1990 the Twins were in last place in the AL West, 29 games behind. Then, the Twins went from dead last to first and won the World Series against the Atlanta Braves.

In the NFL, the 2008 New Orleans Saints finished last in their division, but in 2009 they won their first Superbowl led by quarterback Drew Brees. Of course, the 1999 St. Louis Rams also deserve mentioning. In 1998 they were in last place in their division but in 1999 the “Greatest Show on Turf” emerged behind QB Kurt Warner. His personal story is compelling as well. He was stocking shelves in a grocery store 5 years earlier having been released in training camp from the Green Bay Packers.

And if you like to watch the Kentucky Derby every year, you probably remember the 50-1 longshot Mine that Bird coming from dead last, 29 lengths behind the field to win the 2009 Kentucky Derby. Mine that Bird was so far back the announcer almost forgot to mention him. Of course, the famed 5000 win jockey, Calvin Borel, deserves a lot of the credit. On a sloppy track the hall of fame jockey, steered the horse along the rail when other horses were tiring and won going away by 6 lengths. You may have even seen the movie, 50-1, based on the true-life story.

Well, the Christian faith is all about the true-life stories of last to first winners in Christ. In fact, every Christian, you and I included, have the same worst to first story! But, the most incomprehensible part of the story is that the believer in Christ doesn't finish first because he or she is a harder working, more talented individual! No, the first-place finish, that is, the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom, is only by grace - God's grace that is given through Christ Jesus!

I. From last to first is not possible by man's imperfect works

But, there's got to be something that I have to do, right? It can't just be all an undeserved gift from God, can it? Well, there's a reason why Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard. He wanted to show how a person gets into heaven. But it's not by working, as the title of the parable might lead one to surmise – at least not man's work.

What is confounding to any accountant is that any type of pay scale gets thrown out the window when it's time to settle up with the workers. There's no direct correlation between the amount of work and the amount of pay. And that's on purpose! It's God's purpose to show each of us how we don't deserve heaven in the least, but that He graciously gives it to us – because He is good.

But before we look closer at the parable, we need to look closer at the previous chapter – chapter 19. It's the genesis of this parable where a real-life question was posed to Jesus.

“Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16)

How would you answer that? Well, Jesus answers him. No one is good except God. That means you already have no chance at success. You see, it's actually not just doing one good thing. It's doing everything, keeping all the commandments...perfectly.

And the rich young man was brazen and foolish enough to say that he's done all that...since I was a boy. What else?

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Matthew 19:21)

You should have no problem giving all your possessions to the poor and following Me. Because, well, the very first commandment requires you to have no other gods but Me. And money certainly isn't your god...is it?

Well, the young man went away sorrowful because he loved his riches more than Jesus. Oh, how people cling to the temporary riches of this world, instead of following Jesus and receiving the eternal joy and treasure of heaven which Jesus offers!

The disciples quickly asked, **“Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)**

Jesus closes out chapter 19 promising the inheritance of eternal life to all who follow Him. **(Matthew 19:29)**. For an inheritance is never earned but given. And when this free gift is given in the regeneration with all its glory, then the last will be first. **(Matthew 19:30)**

To drive this point home for us today, Jesus gives us the parable of the vineyard workers. The parable is about the kingdom of heaven as Jesus plainly states when He begins to tell it.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” (Matthew 20:1)

The landowner is God and the unemployed workers are, you guessed it, you and me and every person on earth. Sin has resulted in 100% unemployment in God's vineyard. It makes our current pandemic unemployment numbers look pretty good.

Sinful man is disconnected from God, idle in the marketplace. He's in last place on his way to hell. It's absolutely impossible for him to change his lot. But, everything changes in an instant. There's an invitation to enter the vineyard. There is a call to faith into the kingdom of grace, that is. And there is a promise given. There is an agreement between God and sinful man. There's the promise of a denarius – entrance into heaven, that is. Believe in Me and you will be saved.

Others are called at different times of the day. There is the agreement that “what is right” will be given to all who enter to work in the vineyard.

II. From last to first is only possible by grace, through Christ's perfect atoning work on the cross

What's next? Payday...with a twist. For those workers who entered the vineyard at the end of the day are paid first. The last are first? What? That's not the way things are supposed to be done! The workers who have spent more time in the vineyard under the hot sun should be attended to first, right? Wrong! The landowner can do what he wants. It's His business, right? So we heard in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. 9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8,9)

Those who complain and argue that their works are worthy of heaven, will take what is theirs, their sinful self-righteousness and go away...to where the last go...hell itself. Yes, there are hypocrites in the church of God.

But God's principle thoughts and fervent desire are what Isaiah reveals.

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

God will pardon! The last, the repentant, will be first. They will enter heaven. Those who entered the vineyard at the eleventh hour surely did not do enough work to merit the denarius wage of a full day. They received the denarius only because the owner is good, only because He is gracious. He abundantly pardons in the Christ, the Son of the Living God! That is the message Jesus is telling with this parable!

The repentant thief on the cross, as you remember, received this pardon in his eleventh hour. He was as last as they come, being hung on the cross for his crime. There was no time to work off his sins. Nor was it possible. Yet, Jesus said to him, **“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”** You will be first, by faith in Me. For, I have become last for you by My death and resurrection! With God all things are possible!

At whatever hour God calls us into heaven, we are content. As Paul says in our epistle reading from Philippians 1:21, **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”**

By God's grace we have been called into His vineyard through baptism. To live for Christ is to serve Him with thanksgiving all the days of our life, not because it will gain our denarius of eternal life, but because it has already been gained for us through Christ's sacrifice.

Paul continues to describe the vineyard work by saying, **“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29)**

So, Jesus told James and John in the verses immediately following our Gospel when their mother asked for them to be seated at His right and left. **“You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with...” (Matthew 20:23)**

To partake in the sufferings of Christ is the joy for everyone who is called to serve in Jesus' vineyard, whether it be in the first hour, bearing the heat of the day or later in the day.

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” (1 Peter 4:12-14)

As Jesus has made us first in His kingdom of grace, we also follow our Lord by putting others first. So Jesus summarizes this teaching in with these words immediately following His parable.

“And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:27-28)

Yes, each of us in a race! THE race of all races! We enter the race of life weighed down with sin with no hope of winning the crown of life. We begin the race as bottom dwellers in our division, the division of sinful humanity.

We truly deserve the title 'Aints'. You remember how the New Orleans Saints fans put paper bags over their heads because they were too embarrassed to be seen as fans of their team? Well, there 'aint' a paper bag big enough to cover up all our sinfulness and shame. And we 'aint' got the righteousness that is necessary to enter heaven.

But, there's good news! Jesus took all our shame on Himself and ran the race for us! He humbled Himself and died that we would receive the gift of eternal life! And He rose in victory and is now seated at the right hand of God! It is He who is the Author and Finisher of your race!

He makes you first place finishers by grace! He replaces our paper bag of shame with the crown of life! He makes each of our races of life, the greatest comeback stories of all time.

“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Without Jesus, our odds of finishing the race and winning the prize are incalculable. Our odds are not 100-1 or 50-1. But there are no odds – not even one chance. But Christ has already finished the race and He graciously gives you His victory through faith. He guarantees you that when you finish the race, He'll give you what is right! He'll give you the denarius of eternal life...only by grace...only because He is good! Any complaints? No complaints from God's saints through Jesus! Amen.

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)