

“If you ain’t first, you’re last”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor---Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 4/26/20

Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Matthew 20:1-16

In about 2007 or so, my family and I were traveling during summer vacation from Reno, Nevada where we had been staying with friends back to El Paso, TX where Ruth’s family was. We try to do it in one go but often have to stop at least one night on the way. It is hours and hours of desolate desert in Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico, a trip we had made many times before, but nothing made it easier. Our boys were at the age of restlessness in the back seat of the car and we had brought our laptop to play them movies on—anything to distract them from the long, uneventful drive. We had picked up a couple movies from the store that had been on sale (but we hadn’t seen before). One was “Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby” starring Will Ferrell. It was a satirical film about NASCAR culture in North Carolina and because I was driving, all I could do was listen to the movie (not actually see it). But the phrase that stuck out to me was the fictional NASCAR driver Ricky Bobby’s lifelong mantra, “If you ain’t first, you’re last,” which he repeated throughout the movie. Ricky Bobby (Will Ferrell’s character) built his whole driving career around this funny phrase. It was meant to bring laughs, and our car was roaring with laughter two hours straight. It was meant to sound brilliant but really reeked of dichotomous ignorance or shallow black-and-white thinking; its meaning centering around the idea that if you’re not in first place, you might as well be in last place because those are the only two options—and you never want to be last!

Most people, maybe not publically, but certainly privately, want to be in first place. We like to win. We feign humility and brush off the accolades but more often than not we intrinsically desire to be recognized and honored by others. We all, at least secretly, want to win. Jesus knew this when speaking to first Century Jews—because this particular character trait seems to be universal, transcending all cultures and all time periods. The desire to be placed at the head of the line or in a place of honor is not a unique one. Our culture, however, has rules (social rules)—at least on the surface. I mean, there are always exceptions to the rules, but for the most part we like to think that we all follow them and if someone doesn’t, they will be duly shamed and punished. I’ll give you one example of such unpublished rules: Wait your turn in line. Or better yet, as we learned as children; “no cutting!” This ardent rule is mostly inflexible, and we act as monitors of the rule, publically, even calling out people who might willingly violate it and in some cases even punish them. Our ugliest versions of this can be seen in road-rage incidents where one person cuts off another in traffic, and then it escalates into a chase-down or a physical fight or even in some cases, a death. As a culture, we do not tolerate cutting in line.

When we first moved to the Middle East in 2003, I was introduced to a new set of rules when it came to line forming—largely that there were none. Every person for themselves, pushing and shoving, in order to be served first. It was frustrating having just come from a culture where people are even killed when not properly waiting their turn, and now it seemed no one’s place in line was assured without pushing yourself to the front. And the weirdest part for me was that it seemed no one was offended. When you cut someone off on the road, there were no shouting matches, chase downs or fights. People didn’t seem to be personally offended by such actions, and so I had to learn to be not be as well, and to assert myself when wanting to be served in a line, like even ordering at McDonald’s; now I had to look pushy to get my order placed. It was a cultural shift for me. But the desire to be first, I confirmed, is indeed universal. Everyone wants to be first, well usually (often secretly for a lot of us)—unless there is a

personal transformation inside us that changes this desire and opens us to a new disposition, a new way of thinking altogether. And that's what Jesus was talking about when he said, "the first will be last and the last will be first."

Jesus had spent his prime teaching years showing his followers that what they had aspired to, what they had thought to be holy or sacred, what they thought to be most worthy of honor was in fact in contradiction to what God felt honorable or worthy of praise. Jesus, along with his cousin John (the Baptist) had shifted the sacredness of what was deemed most holy away from the temple in Jerusalem, which had been the focus of the priests and religious leaders, now to the Jordan River area where the people were being baptized and having religious experiences... to the wilderness, where people were interacting with God, to the countryside where the villagers were seeing miracle after miracle. Jesus shifted the religious center from the Holy Mount to the people and nature itself: The first will be last and the last will be first.

This principle of topsy-turvy was seemingly applied over and over in Jesus' three years of ministry throughout the region. It can be seen in his focus and location. It can also be seen in his breaking down of racist and religion-centric thinking. He purposely praised the Samaritans, who were no Jews and whose race and religion differed from his own, and who were often oppressed because of it, but he chose to elevate them, for example in his story of the "Good Samaritan" where the Jewish religious leaders were at fault and the Samaritan man the hero: The first will be last and the last will be first.

Or where the children were annoying the disciples and Jesus instead had them bring a child into the center of the group and chided his followers, telling them they in fact need to be like these children in order to enter God's kingdom (on earth or otherwise), but the children—the most disempowered of people are to be revered and modeled after: The first will be last and the last will be first.

Or perhaps we can see it more clearly in the Roman Centurion who seeks Jesus' help to heal his servant, a man who is as pagan as any Roman at the time and seen as an oppressor to Jesus' own people but yet Jesus says of him "there is no one of greater faith in all of Israel than this man": The first will be last and the last will first.

But Jesus did not hide his feelings towards the most marginalized of society. No. He of course made it clear, "what you have done for the least of these you have done unto me." Jesus wanted to create a cultural shift then and I believe as his followers it is our duty to do the same within ourselves today. We must stop seeking to be first. We must think of others above ourselves. This is how we begin to teach the generations that come after us the power of putting others before ourselves. It starts with how we view others. Like in Jesus' parable about the vineyard owner who hired people to work his fields, paying them a daily rate and then needing more help hired on more people throughout the day and paid them the same (however, for technically less work). The original workers saw this as unfair. How many of us look around at others and judge them because they receive a "handout" from taxes that we pay? Or angry when we see an abled body person asking for help? Jesus admonishes us to no longer view the world that way. He says, to simply love all people and be happy for them when they are able to get a bonus. And why? Like we learned in Deuteronomy, the Mosaic Law... we do not get jealous or angry because there are people in greater need than we are. We must be grateful whenever and by whatever means that need can be somewhat alleviated. We should rejoice, not be embittered. We should strive to help, not hoard. Jesus invites us to elevate others above ourselves, using the principles established in the Hebrew laws of justice and preserved by the prophets that looks out for all people, whether foreign

or native. All people deserve to survive. So “if you ain’t first, you’re last” is kinda where we should be, right? And we should take those in last place and put them at the front of the line, because that’s what love does. My encouragement for all of us during this pandemic is to think about the people being left out. The refugees in our country who cannot work because of Corona Virus or who will not receive any stimulus help because they have not been able to file taxes yet due to the process of their refugee applications. There are many who fall under this category who are suffering and will not see any relief. Our Lynchburg Immigrant Services network is trying to help where we can so feel free to donate there if you feel led. There is a place for a donation on our Church of the Covenant donation page at chcov.org.

Shalom