

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“The End of Entitlement” (Matthew 20:1-16)
September 20, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of my favorite teachers in elementary school was my third grade teacher, Mrs. Stevens. She was “old school” in the best sense. If I remember correctly I do not remember seeing her smile until close to Christmas break (which looking back now as an adult actually makes a lot of sense). Mrs. Stevens instilled in us the joy of reading, taught us geography and spelling and math and many other subjects. But the most important thing I remember learning from Mrs. Stevens actually had nothing to do with any of that.

On the first day of school Mrs. Stevens asked us to line up to go to lunch, and so as you could imagine we all scrambled over one another and jostled with one another to get as close to the front of the line as we could. But once the line was formed, Mrs. Stevens did something none of us expected, something in fact that really annoyed most of us. She silently walked to the very end of the line where our one classmate in a wheelchair, Susan, was patiently waiting. “This is actually the front of the line,” Mrs. Stevens said, “Let’s go.” And she led Susan, who was never used to being at the front of any line and had more challenges than any of the rest of us could ever understand, and the rest of us followed. Of course the next time Mrs. Stevens asked us to line up, we all scrambled and jostled to be as close to Susan as we could, but eventually that changed too...back to that later.

Along these lines I am preaching today about something very dangerous, something that can wreak havoc in your personal life and professional life, and can severely damage every relationship in your life...entitlement. I am not talking about entitlements like social security or welfare, but rather the idea of entitlement, that you have a right to something and inherently deserve special treatment and privileges because you are somehow superior to those who “owe” you these things.

I recently read a fascinating online article entitled (pun intended) “Sense of Entitlement May Lead to Vicious Cycle of Distress” about an extensive study done at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio in which:

Researchers discovered entitlement, defined as a personality trait driven by exaggerated feelings of deservingness and superiority—may lead to chronic disappointment, unmet expectations, and a habitual, self-reinforcing cycle of behavior...“At extreme levels, entitlement is a toxic narcissistic trait, repeatedly exposing people to the risk of feeling frustrated, unhappy, and disappointed with life,” said Joshua Grubbs, a recent Ph.D. graduate from Case Western Reserve. “Often times, life, health, aging, and the social world don’t treat us as well as we’d like. Confronting these limitations is especially threatening to an entitled person because it violates their worldview of self-superiority,” said Grubbs. Reacting to perceived injustices, entitled people may direct their anger outward, blaming others, while reassuring themselves of their own specialness—thus beginning the cycle again.

Moreover, this entitlement cycle often has three stages: “First, entitlement creates a constant vulnerability to unmet expectations”; second, “Unmet expectations then lead to dissatisfaction and other volatile emotions”; and third, “Emotional distress demands a remedy, leading to the reinforcement of superiority” (Rick Nauert, August 8, 2018). The entitlement cycle is a vicious one indeed.

But such entitlement, such “exaggerated feelings of deservingness” accompanied by a “worldview of self-superiority” is rampant. You do not have to look very far to see it indeed “exposing people to the risk of feeling frustrated, unhappy, and disappointed with life”—especially those who like my third grade classmates and I felt entitled to be at the front of the line because we had scrambled and jostled to get there.

Like an infestation of termites, entitlement can undermine and slowly cause horrendous unseen damage until what appeared on the outside to be a sturdy well-built structure suddenly proves to be on the verge of collapse. Entitlement always proves destructive in families, as parents blame their children who “owe” them or children who blame their parents who “owe” them, or both. Entitlement always proves destructive in marriages in which one spouse blames the other because they somehow “owe” them. Entitlement always proves destructive to any human organization in which some feel and act superior, more deserving, than everyone else—and yes, entitlement can even rear its ugly head in the church.

But in today's gospel passage Jesus tells a parable that marks the end of entitlement, a parable that for many is the most annoying parable Jesus ever taught:

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "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." But he replied to one of them, "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? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last (Matthew 20:1-16).

From an entitled worldly perspective on the surface it appears that the grumbling workers who had "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" would deserve more than the slackers who had only worked an hour, right? And not only deserved more wages, but also deserved to be paid first because they were entitled to be at the front of the line, right? Perhaps this parable annoys some of you, especially those who have thrived in our meritocracy society and are pretty used to being near the front of the line. But to those of you who like our classmate Susan in the wheelchair had long ago given up any illusion that you are somehow superior, more deserving, somehow entitled...ah, this parable is very good news.

When it comes to God's grace, God does exactly what the landowner in this parable does: God gives more than anyone deserves, beginning with those who appear least deserving, silently walking over to those who are used to never being in the front of the line and telling the class, "This is actually the front of the line. The last will be first, and the first will be last. Let's go."

But again, while this aspect of God's grace in which God chooses to give to the last the same as everyone else and bluntly asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" is annoying to some, but to others, it is very good news.

In his 2009 book *Lost in the Meritocracy* renowned novelist and literary critic Walter Kirn vulnerably described his life of scrambling and jostling to assure his entitled spot at the front of the line:

A natural born child of the meritocracy, I'd been amassing momentum my whole life, entering spelling bees, vying for forensics medals, running my mouth in mock United Nations, and I knew only one direction: forward. I lived for prizes, plaques, citations, stars, and I gave no thought to any goal beyond my next appearance on the honor roll. Learning was secondary, promotion was primary. No one ever told me what the point was, except to keep on accumulating points, and this struck me as sufficient. What else was there? (9).

Throughout the book Kirn reveals how ultimately his life of meritocracy, his life of entitlement, left him empty. But at the end of the book he described how that changed when he was bedridden with pneumonia and began reading classic books off his mother's bookcase:

It began at last: my education. I wasn't sure what it could get me, whose approval it might win, or how long it might take to complete (forever, I had an inkling), but for once those weren't my first concerns. Alone in my room, congested and exhausted, I forgot my obsession with self-advancement. I wanted to lose myself...Instead of filling in the blanks, I wanted to be a blank and be filled in (211).

God's grace meets those who like Walter Kirn find themselves exhausted by the "obsession with self-advancement", trapped in the cycle of entitlement.

God's grace marks the end of entitlement.

Jesus never scrambled and jostled for the front of any line. Jesus never "lived for prizes, plaques, citations, stars." Rather, scripture tells us that even though Jesus was (and is) the Son of God, and therefore entitled to all the privileges pertaining thereto, he emptied himself and humbled himself to being a servant and executed among criminals in the most painful and degrading way imaginable, death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). In his passion and death Jesus willingly became the One who bore "the burden of the day and the scorching heat" and willingly took the last place in line.

Why?

Because when it comes to God's grace, God does exactly what the landowner in today's parable does: God gives more than anyone deserves because God chooses to do so, beginning with those who appear least entitled and at the end of the line. When it comes to God's grace, "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Back to my third grade class and then I'll close...eventually the grace Mrs. Stevens showed Susan, our wheelchair bound classmate, by consistently choosing her to be at the front of every line—whether to go to lunch or recess or P.E. or music class—eventually that grace rubbed off on the rest of us. For one day Mrs. Stevens said we could choose who would be first in line...and although initially several of us raised our hands, "Me! Me!" after a moment we chose Susan because somehow the need to scramble and jostle to be first in line just didn't seem that important anymore...and when we did, we saw the biggest smile of year on Mrs. Stevens' face, even bigger than the one before Christmas break.

Today if you can relate to Walter Kirn and are exhausted by the "obsession with self-advancement", worn down by the ceaseless scrambling and jostling to be first in line, or somehow trapped in the cycle of entitlement, may the Holy Spirit enable you to want to be a blank and be filled in...with God's grace—grace that is good news for everyone in line, grace that marks the end of entitlement.

Amen.