

"The First and the Last"

Matthew 20:1-16

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Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word we may see and know Jesus the Christ and better understand his will for our lives. For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

In a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "The Fortunate Ones," journalist Graeme Wood begins this way,

The October 2008 issue of *Super Yacht World* confirmed it: money cannot buy happiness. Page 38 of the "international magazine for superyachts of distinction" –if you have to ask what it takes for a yacht to qualify as "super," you can't afford to be in the showroom—presented the Martha Ann, a 230 foot, \$125 million boat boasting a crew of 20, a master bedroom the size of a house, and an interior gaudy enough to make Saddam Hussein blush. The feature story on the Martha Ann was published just as the S&P suffered its worst week since 1933, shedding \$1.4 trillion over the course of the week, or about 2,240 Martha Anns every day. Still, one of the captions accompanying the lavish photos betrayed the status anxiety that afflicts even the highest echelons of wealth. "From these LOFTY HEIGHTS," the caption promises, "guests will be able to look down on virtually any other yacht."

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Could it be, do you suppose, that those who possess great wealth also possess great anxieties associated with that wealth? That is essentially what the article goes on to argue, based on the findings of the most comprehensive study of wealth ever conducted entitled "The Joys and Dilemmas of Wealth." It was conducted by Boston College's Center on Wealth and Philanthropy, with assistance from the Gates Foundation and the Templeton Foundation. 160 people responded to the anonymous, online survey with 120 of them having a net worth of at least \$25 million. The average net worth of all respondents was \$78 million.

In general, the respondents were a pretty dissatisfied group, whose money has contributed to their deep anxieties involving love, work and family. And they are dissatisfied with their sizable fortunes. In fact most of them do not consider themselves to be financially secure. For that they would require on average one-quarter more wealth than they already possess. One respondent, the heir to an enormous fortune said that what mattered to him most was his Christianity, and that his greatest aspiration was to "love the Lord, my family, and my friends." Then he reported that he wouldn't feel financially secure unless he had a net worth of one billion dollars. Says a sociologist quoted in the article who works a lot with wealthy clients, "Money is like fire, it will warm your feet or it will burn your socks off" (April, 2011).

It's staggering to think that someone with a net worth of \$78 million would desire still more. As the study reveals, however, the more one has the more one worries about losing it. It has been long noted in philanthropic circles based on other studies, that the more money people have, the smaller the percentage of their worth they give away. You'd think it would be just the opposite—that those who have more would give more. Instead, it's those with less who give away greater percentages.

So maybe Jesus was onto something when, for example, he encountered a rich young ruler one day who couldn't give up his possessions, prompting Jesus to explain how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Because in the very next chapter in Matthew's Gospel, he follows up with a parable about entitlements.

A landowner needs workers and so he hires some very early in the morning, then again around 9:00 o'clock. He did the same thing at noon and again at 3:00 o'clock. Then he went out and hired some more workers at 5:00 o'clock—about one hour before quitting time. At the end of the work day, the landowner instructs the manager to pay the workers beginning with the last ones hired. And they received the regular daily wage in spite of only working one hour. When those who were hired first stepped forward to receive their pay, they assumed that they would receive more but instead, they too received the usual daily wage—the wage they'd agreed to. And Jesus said, "So the last will be first and the first will be last."

And they grumbled against the landowner. And in their grumbling, we hear echoes of an older brother, don't we—an older brother who did not demand his inheritance only to run off and squander it away. And when the prodigal finally makes his way home only to be graciously and lavishly welcomed back, it is the older brother, the obedient, hardworking, non-playboy son who takes offense at his father's generosity.

What about me? Where's mine? This isn't fair.

Well, what about those workers who worked all day long? Shouldn't they have received more? Are they not entitled to more? After all, we like to be rewarded for our efforts. We believe in the basic economic premise that hard work pays dividends and that the harder you work the more reward you will have at the end of the day because of your efforts.

So what are we to make of this parable? Businesses cannot operate in the way this parable is suggesting. And where in this parable is the incentive to work hard and get ahead? Given what transpired with the compensation, wouldn't the landowner have a difficult time the next day finding enough workers to put in an entire day's work? Won't they instead all show up at the end of the day, do as little as possible and yet receive a full day's wage? If you are cynical about people and their motives, I suppose you'd think that. And if you believe that people actually feel good about being unemployed and that they don't really mind feeling as

if they are wasting their skills and gifts by not contributing in meaningful ways, you might come to that conclusion.

I'm not that cynical, however. I believe that when given opportunities to work and to contribute, everyone ultimately wants that and would welcome such opportunities. But I also know that businesses would have a hard time staying in existence if they structured their compensation the way Jesus describes it in his parable. And a society cannot exist that way.

But here's another thing I firmly believe:

A society also cannot continue to exist where so few have so much and where so many have so little.

Increasingly in America, as the middle class continues to shrink, we are becoming a society of the First and the Last. I'm sure you saw the recent Census data released earlier this week that documents what many have feared and suspected, that the poor are in fact getting poorer and that the spread between the haves and the have nots, between the First and the Last is widening. Currently, one in six Americans lives in poverty. The numbers are worse for children and people of color.

Even worse is the global situation where one billion of the earth's residents are forced to live on less than two dollars a day. And it remains a diabolical scandal that 30,000 children die each and every day due to hunger and diseases that are preventable—sometimes simply from a lack of clean drinking water.

I know it's complicated but we are often held hostage by our broken political system that is increasingly and repugnantly self-serving. When it comes to poverty, I've come to conclude that conservatives are right when they claim that cultural and moral issues, such as the breakdown of the family and personal responsibility, as well as promiscuity and substance abuse are prime reasons that many simply cannot overcome poverty. But liberals are also right when they call for more access to healthcare and better nutrition and housing and better education as ways to help overcome poverty. Different approaches to glaring cultural problems where real lives hang in the balance, should never take a back seat to partisan political gridlock.

The stakes are too high. And consider the economics of living in a world of Firsts and Lasts, and particularly a world where the Lasts make up a rapidly growing percentage of the population while more and more of the world's wealth is ending up in the hands of the Firsts. Is that sustainable or is it a recipe for disaster? Prayed one liberation theologian working among the poorest of the poor, "Some have food to eat, some have none. Let the revolution begin."

The parable by Jesus of Firsts and Lasts is not based on the teachings of the University of Chicago School of Economics, or the London School of Economics or any other school of economics, for that matter. This parable is based on Gospel Economics. And Gospel Economics is bound to leave us scratching our heads while feeling a little unsettled. Its purpose is to confound conventional wisdom and cause us to reconsider all of our previously held assumptions.

But am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Doesn't that sound familiar? It's in the parable, after all. And doesn't that make sense? Except, it's not one of the workers in the parable asking the rhetorical question, it's the landowner—in other words, it's God asking that question. Which leads to a common misunderstanding and that is to believe that everything we have belongs to us. That we've earned it, we deserve it all and that therefore it's solely up to us to decide how to spend it.

Gospel Economics rejects that notion outright. In Jesus' economic paradigm, none of what we have belongs to us, it all belongs to God. And ultimately, we are accountable to God in terms of what we do with it.

And yet the people who were fairly compensated at the end of the day grumbled about the generosity of the landowner because they wanted more. They were expecting more—feeling entitled. It reflects, I think, the inherent insecurity of those Jesus identifies as the Firsts.

It's why I love the example given to us in the NFL draft, a system that the multi-millionaire and billionaire team owners acknowledge as being good for the game. The teams at the bottom get the first picks and the best talent, while the teams at the top get the last picks. "But wait, we won the Super Bowl, we should get the first pick! We've earned it!" No, there's none of that among the billionaire team owners because they have come to understand that parity is good for the overall health of the game. It makes the games more exciting which helps with ratings and increases profits. In other words, it helps everyone, the Firsts and the Lasts.

So if you want the world to be more fairly arranged—if you want to lift all boats, why not start with those who own the biggest ones—the ones say around 230 feet in length and in the \$125 million range and ask them to do more than they're doing right now. Why in God's name wouldn't we ask them to shoulder more of the burden than the hard working guy with one small fishing boat trying desperately to feed his family? That's Gospel Economics.

I wonder if Jesus told this parable because he encountered along the way, people like the rich young ruler who couldn't part with what he had, and because he wanted to shake up his hearers and call attention to the painful truth that the world is unfair and that it needs to be made fairer. And that it's not going to be an easy sell with people like that insecure rich young ruler?

Or maybe he told it because as he looked around, Jesus saw a world of glaring contrasts—a world of extreme poverty and yet extravagant, almost obscene wealth, a world of Firsts and Lasts, and he saw how corrupt and cruel and rotten it all was, and it broke his heart.

Amen.