

“THE LAST WILL BE FIRST”

**A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
September 18, 2005**

Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45
Matthew 20: 1-16

What is Jesus possibly trying to teach in this parable of laborers in the vineyard?ⁱ It seems so unfair. A landowner hires farm workers early in the morning for the usual daily wage. Later in the day he hires more workers, this time telling them simply “I will pay you whatever is right.” He does this at nine in the morning, noon, three in the afternoon and finally at five o’clock in evening – just an hour before the work day is over. Then, no matter how long they’ve worked, all laborers end up getting paid exactly the same amount: a full day’s wage. Understandably, there’s some grumbling among those who actually worked the full day. How can this be fair: those who’ve been out in the fields only for an hour in the evening are paid exactly the same as those who have been there since dawn? But the landowner replies, in effect, to one who’s complaining: “What’s the problem here? I’ve paid you exactly what we agreed to. What right do you have to complain about what I’ve chosen to pay others? Do you begrudge me my generosity to others?” Then Jesus adds this clincher of a commentary to the whole parable: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

As I’ve struggled to understand this parable, I’ve found some help in a short story by Flannery O’Connor. For the last two weeks, I’ve been teaching in Sophomore College here at Stanford, and one of the authors whose whose my class has read is Flannery O’Connor. This morning I want to discuss a short story of hers called “Revelation,”ⁱⁱ – one which we actually didn’t study in class. Flannery O’Connor, as I’m sure most of you know, is a twentieth-century

American author who was born in Georgia and spent most of her life in the South. She wrote a couple of novels and a number of short stories, and then died of lupus in 1964 at the age of 39.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Revelation” is set in a Southern doctor’s waiting room, presumably in the late 1950’s or early 1960’s. The main character is a Mrs. Turpin, who’s brought her husband, Claude, in with an ulcerated leg after he was kicked by a cow. There’s a collection of people in the waiting room – all white people, although a black employee from the local drug store comes through at one point with some medications that the doctor has ordered. Mrs. Turpin feels very grateful for everything she’s been given in life and for who she is. She especially thanks God that she’s neither black nor what she calls “white trash.” There is a woman in the waiting room whom she considers white trash, along with her child. There’s someone else, on the other hand, whom she considers a true “lady,” there with her college-age daughter, whom we later learn is home on vacation from Wellesley. There’s an elderly gentleman, and an old woman, and a younger white woman whom Mrs. Turpin considers “not white trash, just common.” (The words echo from the gospel: “The last will be first, and the first will be last.”)

Mrs. Turpin seems to have a pleasant personality and good disposition on the surface, but she’s very judgmental deep down, with a clear social hierarchy in her mind for the American South: Blacks are at the bottom with white trash next to them. Then there are homeowners, and then the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above them were “people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and more land.”^{iv} At this point, as the text explains, “the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below her and Claud, and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent, and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well.”^v The last will be first and the first will be last?

At some point it starts to become clear to Mrs. Turpin that the lady's college-age daughter, who has been reading a thick blue book called *Human Development*, really doesn't like her. She scowls at Mrs. Turpin, slams her book shut and stares at her, and makes faces. This staring and scowling gets worse when Mrs. Turpin criticizes black people lazy, as no longer willing to pick cotton, as requiring "buttering up...if you want em to work for you."^{vi} The scowling also increases when Mrs. Turpin politely snubs or talks down to the woman she considers white trash.

Mrs. Turpin is oblivious to her bigotry, however, and as she listens to gospel music on the waiting room radio, she reminds herself of her philosophy of life: "To help anybody out that needed it... She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent." She goes on to think, "If Jesus had said, 'You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can't be a good woman with it,' she would have had to say, 'Well, don't make me that then. Make me a good woman, and it don't matter what else, how fat or ugly or poor!'" But then Mrs. Turpin's heart rose as she realized that he had made her herself and given her a little of everything. "Jesus, thank you!" she said to herself. "Thank you thank you thank you!"^{vii} She felt buoyant as she counted her blessings, presumably thinking of those less fortunate: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." (I've heard that phrase repeated as those of us, far away from the Gulf Coast, think of the devastating human cost of Hurricane Katrina. "There, but for the grace of God, go I").

When the student's eyes on her begin to feel like drills, Mrs. Turpin finally turns to her and declares boldly, "You must be in college...I see you reading a book there." The student continues to stare at her and pointedly refuses to answer. Her proper, well-dressed mother blushes at the rudeness and explains that her daughter goes to Wellesley College in

Massachusetts. “Way up north,” Mrs. Turpin murmurs and thinks, “Well, it hasn’t done much for her manners.”^{viii} Her mother adds a few comments about her daughter being too much of a bookworm and not having enough fun, about her tendency to criticize and complain – never smiling and never seeming grateful for what she’s been given. At this point, Mrs. Turpin says, “It never hurt anyone to smile...It just makes you feel better all over...If it’s one thing I am, it’s grateful. When I think of who I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything... I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!’ It could have been different! Oh, thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!”^{ix}

At this point the *Human Development* textbook hits Mrs. Turpin directly over her left eye. Then the Wellesley student leaps across the room, howling, and grabs her by the neck: “The girl’s fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck.”^x The table turns over, magazines fly this way and that, and people leap to restrain the student. Ultimately, the doctor gives the student a tranquilizer injection, and she’s carried off in an ambulance to the hospital as a lunatic. That’s not before this happens, though:

“Mrs. Turpin’s head cleared, and her power of motion returned. She leaned forward until she was looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. ‘What you got to say to me?’ she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.

“The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s. “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,” she whispered. Her voice was low but clear.”^{xi}

Mrs. Turpin is not able to shake off these words, which have gone straight to her heart. Back at home she cries with her husband [As the text describes it]: “I am not a wart hog. From hell.’ But the denial had no force. The girl’s eyes and her words...brook no repudiation... She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to

whom it might justly have been applied... The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman.”^{xii} The first will be last.

Near the end of the story, as she hoses down the hog pen on her farm at the end of the day, Mrs. Turpin begins confronting God, almost like Jacob wrestling with the angel or Job demanding his day in the heavenly court: “What do you send me a message like that for? ... Why me? ... It’s no trash around here, black or white, that I haven’t given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church... How am I a hog? ... I could quit working and take it easy and be filthy... Lounge about the sidewalks all day drinking root beer... Who do you think you are?”

Then Mrs. Turpin has a vision: Picking up on a purple streak in the sky at sunset, she sees it as:

A vast swinging bridge extending up 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 bands of black[s] ... in white robes, 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 and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.^{xiii}

And so “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” In Jesus’ parable, all of the laborers in the vineyard ultimately get paid a full day’s wage, no matter how much more “deserving” they may think they are than others. Mrs. Turpin may have been called a wart hog from hell, but the full revelation has her heading toward heaven, albeit at the end of the line. There seems to be a kind of purgatory at work on the road, too, as her supposed virtues are being burned away. Putting aside a next life perspective to think about this life on earth, we may think, along with Mrs. Turpin, that we’re grateful for what we’ve been given in comparison to others:

“There but for the grace of God go I.” But what does that mean for those very others? Has God’s grace been withheld from them so that they might suffer? Will they not be paid the full wages of having been created in God’s image too? I believe that when this country was founded it was said that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [read now “all people”] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” We may think, along with Mrs. Turpin, that we have a philosophy of life to help out anybody who needs it, no matter who they are, but we may also think, along with her, that we can retain our class privilege, our social and intellectual status, our financial security, our health and physical appearance – and be a good woman or man at the same time. But the words still call out to us from the lips of Jesus: “The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The cover of the most recent copy of *Newsweek* magazine has a picture of a black child – eyes filled with tears. The words across the cover are these: “Poverty, Race, and Katrina: Lessons of a National Shame.” The last in our society – the poor, people of color – were considered last, rescued last, fed and sheltered last, and buried last. As the lead article began, “It takes a hurricane. It takes a catastrophe like Katrina to strip away all the old evasions, hypocrisies and not-so-benign neglect.”^{xiv} Our only black senator, Barack Obama, declared: “I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane. They were abandoned long ago – to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.”^{xv}

But the last often looked like the first, morally and spiritually, despite the public images of looting and violence. For example, a chaplain at a shelter in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, wrote Friday of a young chef from the Hard Rock Café in New Orleans. He had lost his work, his car,

and his home. He had not yet been able to locate his family. When he first arrived at the shelter in Hattiesburg, he found that there was no organized food service. So, instead of focusing on his depression, he chose to organize the food service at the shelter and started cooking for 2,700 people until the Red Cross could organize a staff to come in. Between preparing the three meals from food donations each day, he was busy trying to locate his missing family. There are countless more stories like this.^{xvi}

Meanwhile, the first may be last in the aftermath of Katrina, and not just morally and spiritually. Political fortunes may be reversed, starting with the President of the United States. Economic fortunes of some very wealthy people may be erased. Some police officers who were once respected, if not feared, on the streets of New Orleans will, as Police Captain Eddie Hosli put it last week, have their own demons to live with for having deserted their jobs during the crisis.

And how about us, here at Stanford now? What can we learn from Jesus' parable, and from Flannery O'Connor's interpretation of it, whether applied to the response to Katrina or other aspects of our lives? I would say at least this: First, we should have the humility to realize that our social hierarchies – including intellectual snobbery as much as assumed economic entitlement -- are profoundly undermining of the human spirit, not to mention the divine order. Second, we sometimes need to be hit in the head, grabbed by the throat, and wrestled to the floor to understand that counting our blessings – “There, but for the grace of God go I” – can incorrectly imply that others do not share equally in God's grace. And third, we need to realize that we really cannot have it all – caring for others and trying to be a good person, while rigorously maintaining social status, having all the money we want, and being thin and svelte to

boot. To follow in the footsteps of Jesus means there will be cracks in our personal edifice to be tolerated if not also appreciated and honored.

So, may we forget all pretenses, share God's grace equally with others, and lift each other up when struggles lay us low. Now and always. AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ Matthew 20: 1-16.

ⁱⁱ Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," as collected in Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), pp. 191-218.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacket cover of Flannery O'Connor, A Good Man is Hard to Find (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1981).

^{iv} O'Connor, "Revelation," p. 195.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 196.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 199.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 203.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 204.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 206

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 207.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 210.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

^{xiv} Jonathan Alter, "The Other America," *Newsweek* (September 19, 2005), p. 42.

^{xv} Barack Abamu, as quoted in Alter, p. 42.

^{xvi} Cherie Herrboldt, "Day Two at the Hattiesburg Shelter," *SojoMail* (e-mail service), 9/16/05.