

“The First and the Last and the First”
Pastor Miranda Keefe, MS, NCC
Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16
Sunday, September 21st, 2008

Something extraordinary happened this week. The leaders of both parties in Congress and the decision makers in the administration met together and acted together in urgency. They put aside their political and ideological differences and cooperated. This is unusual enough at any time, but this happened weeks before one of the most important elections of our time. One of these leaders said, “We were told that our financial situation was dire and could collapse entirely if we didn’t act. So we acted.”

It’s amazing. I don’t know if they did the right thing. I don’t know if it will keep us from another Great Depression or not. I don’t know what they should do next. But I still think it is amazing that they acted.

But maybe it isn’t so extraordinary. After all it is in both parties interest to keep the American economy solvent. First things first. Before the worries of political self interest has to come our joint economic self interest, our survival. You have to put the horse before the cart. If the horse doesn’t survive the cart isn’t going anywhere anyway. So I guess it wasn’t that extraordinary.

What we saw this week was the princes of our nation act to put the nation’s interests first. Princes is a good term for them, because it means “first.” It started off as just a normal latin term for first. When Octavian Ceasar gave up all political offices and “restored the Republic” and yet still obviously was in control of everything, the powerful in Rome didn’t know how to refer to him. He said he was just another citizen, a nice veneer of humility to mask his absolute power. So they said back, “Yes, but you are the first citizen.” So they called him the prince.

The powerful in Washington and on Wall Street are the princes of our society. They are first in line at the altar of power. They decide what our nation’s priorities are, where we spend our money, where we put our resources, what problems need to be addressed and which ones don’t really matter. This week the First put the nation’s needs first.

Well it seems that way. After all they did act, didn’t they?

A lot of people, me included, have been thinking about the Great Depression this week, thinking about FDR and the New Deal. We’ve been thinking about those first few months of FDR’s presidency and the bold action taken to save this country. When the First put the needs of the nation first.

Or did they?

We have this myth that the 1920s were the “roaring twenties,” a time of normalcy and prosperity and bathtub gin and two chickens in every pot, a rich time had by all like a stutz bearcat roadster barreling down the highway while the beautiful Gatsbys and Daisies inside partied away....until the roadster crashed into Black Tuesday. Then came the 1930s and the Depression. Then, and only then, we had “brother can you spare a dime” and hoboes riding the rails to find whatever work they could and Okies escaping the Dustbowl, piling everything they had in the back of their truck and hoping out west was paradise and not just grapes of wrath. But this is myth.

The Twenties were great for those who were first in line. They were pretty rotten for a lot of other people. Go out to the Lummi Reservation and find an elder and ask him or her what it was like to be an Indian in the 1920's. Poverty that is beyond our comprehension. A way of life destroyed as white people took all the fish. Go talk to black folk that remember Jim Crow and when neckties were made of hemp and hung from tree branches. Go talk to the poor white people in Appalachia, the ones that were so quaintly described as "hillbillies" and laughed at in the funny pages. Right next to the funnies that laughed at the immigrants with their thick accents and big noses. Go talk to the Sikhs who fled for their lives out of Whatcom county early in this century. Go talk to the Chinese workers attacked right here in Fairhaven in the early days when the proper folk came to church on Sunday. Go talk to the mentally ill of that time, if any of them survived the harsh and bitter treatment they called therapy.

The Twenties were not a golden age for those who came last. They were hungry. They were poor. They were disenfranchised. They were left out. We use the term marginalized. It's too weak a term. They were the Last. The last thought about. The last cared for. The last helped. And those who were first didn't care, they didn't begin to act until it was the first themselves whose way of life was threatened. It's no different now.

For too many for too long the American Dream has been a nightmare. The powerful, the First, the Princes of the Universe, they didn't care. Now they care.

Jesus told a story. A story that is difficult. It seems unjust. I remember being 14 years old and sitting in our Lounge here at St. James in a Sunday School class led by Wayne Keller talking about this story. We didn't get it then. We said it seemed like Jesus wasn't fair. We said it didn't seem right. Wayne tried to make sense of it for us, but we weren't buying it.

You see we identified with the First in the story. It's only natural. We understood their feelings. "Gosh, I worked all day and I don't get paid more than *them*? They didn't work at all, they didn't even work up a sweat. I DESERVE MORE THAN THEM." The resentment of the privileged.

I remember being taught at seminary by a radical, young black teacher's aid. All quarter he just assisted the professor. But he got to teach when we got to Liberation Theology. I remember that one class period. He said that in reading the bible context matters. Rich, white, privileged people read the Bible differently, hear something different from the story, than do the underprivileged people of color in poverty. To the privileged the Exodus is about being a chosen people. To the underprivileged it's about freeing slaves. He said to white suburbanites Jesus looks like Jeffrey Hunter grand marshaling the Rose parade. Then he said that to the oppressed poor of El Salvador Jesus looks like Che Guevara in fatigues entering a village with a guerrilla army behind him.

I have trouble with both images. But anyway...

But that's when I learned that who we identify with in the story makes all the difference. When we hear the parable and identify with the First we wonder how can God be like that? Of course we make the story about heaven. It's all about how Jesus saves both the saint and the sinner if they just come to him. But something inside us still has trouble. Could Hitler or Idi Amin or Pol Pot get into heaven if they repented on their death bed? Is that fair? I mean even if Hitler did pray a repentant prayer as he died, doesn't he still *deserve* to suffer somewhat? How can there be justice if the evil and wicked get rewarded for a second of following Jesus just the same as good people who followed Jesus their whole lives? Come on, Jesus! Can't Hitler go

to hell at least for a while? I mean, it's okay to let him out eventually, but shouldn't he go there for a million years or so? No wonder Christians came up with the idea of purgatory.

But if we read it and identify with the Last it's a totally different story. It's not about heaven at all. It's about what earth would be like if heaven's values reigned here. It's about hope. It's about the raisin not drying up in the sun. It's about the other side of the river, not a spiritual Jordan but a literal Rio Grande. It's about poor people marching on Washington. It's about a skinny Indian kid who gets beaten up every week realizing he has as much right as the white kids to an education and a real life. It's about the real horse who pulls the cart for the First pigs who is worked to death. For the parable has the first doing all the work and the first and the last sharing the wealth equally, but we know in both *Animal Farm* and in our world it's the Last who do all the work and the First who take all the wealth.

But this week with everything that's happened, this week with the First afraid we're all going to be Last, this week as I've pondered what I'd say this morning, I realized there's a third way to read this story. A third identification we can make. And I've come to believe this is how Jesus wants us to understand the story.

What if we read the story and instead of thinking of God as the vineyard owner, what if we think of the vineyard owner as us? The First feel cheated, but they weren't. The Last are given hope, and they do need it. But whose the real first who becomes last? Who sacrifices in the story? Who gives and finds it better than receiving? Who is the First who becomes Last to become First? It's Jesus. Who else prayed for those who killed him? Who else gave everything he had for the poor and the "wicked" as much as the rich and the righteous? Who else supped with "sinners?" Although he was in his inherent form divine, the First of all creation, he emptied himself and became a servant and humbled himself even to death, but God has highly exalted him and given him a name above all names. The First and the Last and the First.

And he beckons *us* to follow him, to imitate Christ, to incarnate the vineyard owner in our own lives. To be the First who becomes Last to become First.

I sometimes wonder about people who claim they take the Bible literally, people who make a big deal about having "accepted Jesus as their personal Lord," people who say they've turned over their whole life to Jesus. They seem to focus on stuff Jesus never talked about. Who to exclude. What not to teach in school. But what would it be like to actually *do* what Jesus said and to do it literally? What it would be like to literally bless those who curse me? Someone shouts at me F you. I respond with May nothing but good be in your life and I mean it? What it would be like to literally pray for those who persecute me? Someone plots to attack me and fly planes into my city. I respond with "God forgive them they don't know what they are doing. Give them peace?" What it would be like to literally go out and find the homeless and invite them to come into my house for a party instead of inviting my friends? Someone stands on the corner holding a sign asking for a dollar. I respond by inviting them to go out with me to my favorite restaurant? What would it be like to make friends with the despised? What would it be like to visit the prisoner, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to heal the sick? And to do it with my last penny? To sit at home like it is a prison because I can't afford to go out because I spent the money on lawyers for the prisoners I don't even know. To go hungry at dinner because I can't afford a meal because I spent the money on donations to the Food Bank. To wear patched clothes because I can't afford new ones because I spent the money on blankets for the homeless? To suffer an illness without medication

because I can't afford the co-pay because I spent the money on supporting Interfaith?

What would it be like to liberate the oppressed even if it meant I might be arrested?
What would it be like if we all, all who name the name of Jesus, all who value the values he embodied, if we all did this?

What would it be like if we all even only did this a little bit once in while?

The kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard owner...