

Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..."

Someone this week asked me, "Isn't this kind of the same passage as last week: the first shall be last, and the last, first?"

I babbled something in return. Then I really started to think about the question.

See folks—the things you say to me really STAY with me. You may think I'm sometimes not really listening—but I am. And it is often things that you say to me that get me thinking about you, and me, the world, this church, and God.

And that's a good thing, I think.

Back to the question.

"Isn't this kind of the same passage as last week: the first shall be last, and the last, first?"

Actually—I went back and looked--it's the third time we've heard this.

The first time all of the disciples were discussing who was the greatest: Jesus' response: "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all. "

The second time this comes up Jesus had been talking to a rich young man—telling him that he would have to give up everything that made him a big man in the city.

It would be as if Donald Trump were told that in order to follow Jesus he would have to give up his money and his real estate and his power—then follow Jesus.

The rich man in Jesus' day couldn't do it either.

And Jesus' cryptic words: “

The first will be last, and the last will be first.”

The author of Mark—and Jesus—wants us to make sure we REALLY understand, so we hear it a third time.

This time we have James and John—Sons of Thunder—as they're sometimes called, arguing about who's going to sit at Jesus' right and left hand when he takes up his rule.

Jesus words: “The greatest must become a servant, and whoever wishes to be first, must first be slave of all.”

And for those of us who may not be paying attention: this is one of Jesus' most important teachings. Hence, the three time rule.

And there are slight variations to them, so a person can't wiggle out:

The first instance deals with us, and how we deal with each other. It's about abdicating power in order to be one with everyone, personally.

The second instance dealt with becoming least by giving up “wealth and pelf and name and fame, and all of that noise” in order to be one with everyone, financially.

And the third instance is about leaders: only tyrants lord their power over those they rule. True leaders encourage everyone to succeed.

So now I can answer the question from Mr. Parishioner: yes they are kind of all alike. And like the most important of Jesus' statements: they skew the natural order. They point towards an ideal that the world completely rejects. And—this skewing of the natural order must happen in all facets of society: in our relationships with each other, with our monetary systems, and with anyone who hopes to lead the people of the kingdom into the future.

So---why does Jesus say these things that all our bosses, all our family, all our nation and culture would ridicule?

Because it is the dream of God—this kingdom-- and because unless we embrace equality of persons, status and leadership—we will never be really happy. And Jesus wants us to be happy.

And to make the point clearer-- Jesus spends time with children after each of the first two of these episodes to help us make the connection.

Happiness is our natural state. Happiness is the natural state of little children. The kingdom is built on happiness.

Children don't care about being first in their family—unless we teach them to value it. Children don't care about money—unless we harp on it constantly. And I have witnessed time after time children helping each other, helping animals, and helping old people—unless they are taught not to, or witness non-loving behavior.

They are happy.

I remember thinking that Christmas lost its magic when I became aware that money is everything in our culture. That I was now responsible for amassing that money so I could give my child everything at Christmas.

And you know what happened? When she was 13 months old, she had her first real Christmas. After two presents she got frustrated because we moved on to the next present and she hadn't gotten to play with her 1st present yet. But she learned—from us—that more presents were better than less. But before we, her classmates and television-- obviously taught her that-- she was happy with one present. And bows, and the dog, and a tree inside the house, and us spending time with her. And that's what I remember about my own Christmas's as a child. I just loved being with my family, watching people open presents I gave them. Looking at the lights on the tree as the sun went down. I was happy.

Is personal, professional or monetary power bringing any of us that much happiness?

I look around at the world: at the anger, at the division, and at the unhappiness, and I think we may finally be ready to choose God's

happiness over the world's power, God's happiness over our own wealth, and God's wish for our happiness over prestige or status.

And that happiness will come only after we really understand that everyone is first --and everyone is last --in the kingdom of God. No one is more important, or less important than anyone else.

Isn't it about time we give up this rat race and enjoy being loved by and loving—all? Enjoying every small moment in our world?

Impossible you say?

But don't you yearn for it? God knows we do. I'm tired of all this hate and anger. I want some of what Jesus promises in this kingdom of equality, love and contentment.

But we'll have to give up our dreams of what the world prizes: wealth and power, and dream of what God prizes. Love and delight.

It's God's dream for us. How would that be for a happy ending?

I think I'd prefer the Kingdom of God to the kingdom of Me. And with God all things are possible. Amen.