

“All Are Relevant”

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

On Thursday, September 10, the National Football League made history by playing its first regular season game in Australia. On this date, the Los Angeles Rams and San Francisco 49ers played before a crowd of over 100,000 in a converted cricket field in Melbourne, a game that was televised worldwide. The game was won by the 49ers, led by their quarterback, Brock Purdy, who led the team to the Super Bowl and is one of the leading quarterbacks in the league. This is an extraordinary feat, considering that Purdy was once known as “Mr. Irrelevant” because he was the last player selected in the 2022 NFL Draft. This designation for the last player selected was coined by Paul Salata, who had a short and “irrelevant” career in professional football and sought to bring attention to other unlauded players for whom a professional career was likely to be fleeting. Most of the players given this designation are either released by their team during training camp or go on to undistinguished careers; but when he was selected last after having played college football at Iowa State, Brock Purdy surprised those who dismissed him as “irrelevant” when he was propelled into the starting quarterback role for San Francisco after injuries to the first and second string quarterbacks, Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo. He went on to win all five games he started as his team completed a ten-game winning streak and became the first “Mr. Irrelevant” to throw a touchdown pass in a Super Bowl. Purdy has since been nicknamed “Mr. Relevant” for his immediate impact and rise to prominence and is considered the greatest “Mr. Irrelevant” of all time. In 2025, San Francisco signed Purdy to a \$265 million contract extension – clearly a sign that he is “irrelevant” no more.

Most of us will never participate in a professional sports draft, but many of us know the feeling of being “irrelevant,” of being left unwanted and considered irrelevant. One of my least-favourite memories of my school days was in gym class when the teacher had the students “choose up sides” for a game. Two classmates – usually the best athletes – were chosen as captains, and then the “draft” began as they began to choose players for their teams. Those chosen first were great athletes who everyone knew would be chosen in the first round; then other students were chosen who might have potential to help the teams. Then came the moment when the “irrelevant” players were left, and usually it was with great reluctance that the captains chose

these final, unwanted players – a position in which I often found myself. Even though I found success in my school's music program, I know how it feels to be “Mr. Irrelevant,” to be the one no one wants to choose to be on their side.

There is a similarity between these contexts in which players are chosen for teams with some being left until the very last round and the choices that are made in today's Gospel lesson, often known as the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. As Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem, he offers a parable that brings yet another mystery of the kingdom of heaven into focus. Jesus begins the parable in the familiar world in which day labourers are hired at sunrise and paid at the end of the day, in accordance with both Torah regulations and Jewish practice:

- “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise, they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.” – Deuteronomy 24:14-15.

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard “*went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard*” (Matthew 20:1-2). The “usual daily wage” was a denarius, the normal day's pay for manual labourers hired for the day, but barely enough to maintain a family at a subsistence level (“*I will pay you a drachma a day as wages, as well as expenses for yourself and your son.*” – Tobit 5:15). The image of a vineyard tended by a landowner is a traditional motif in the Old Testament that depicts the Lord cultivating and caring for God's people (“*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!*” – Isaiah 5:7). While the task of hiring day labourers would usually be conducted by the manager of the vineyard, here it is the landowner himself who goes into the marketplace at dawn to hire teams of labourers for the traditional workday that was from sunrise to sunset. For reasons that are also unexplained, the landowner returns to the marketplace throughout the day to hire additional labourers; perhaps he did not realize the enormity of the work that the vineyard required, or he was not as impressed by those who he had not chosen in the first round. Whatever the reason, three times he returns to the marketplace and invites those standing idle to “*also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right*” (20:4). With minimal negotiations, all agree to work for what is just and head off to the vineyard. But the owner is not finished with his visits to the marketplace; he returns there one last time at 5:00 pm, one hour before quitting time, and finds persons standing there who have

gone unchosen all day. When he asks them, “*why are you standing here idle all day?*” the unchosen and irrelevant respond with the obvious: “*Because no one has hired us.*” (20:6-7). Surprisingly, even at this late hour the landowner selects them and invites them to “*also go into the vineyard.*”

- “Though the Bible’s references to ‘standing around’ and ‘standing here idle’ might imply aloofness or laziness on the part of the potential labourers, the Greek behind these phrases simply states that these people were ‘without work’ (*argos*). The generous householder offers employment and purpose to all he encounters.” – Nicholas J. Schaser.

When the workday is over, the landowner instructs the manager of the vineyard to pay the labourers in accordance with the commandment of the Torah, adding that they should be paid “*beginning at the last and then going to the first.*” (20:8). When the group who had been hired last and worked only one hour approached the manager for their pay, the expectation among them and all the workers was that their pay would be commensurate with their work, an hourly wage that would be a fraction of the “usual daily wage” paid to those who had worked all twelve hours. But to their surprise, as well as the surprise of the entire work force, “*each of them received the usual daily wage*” (20:9). One can almost image the crowd doing the math in their heads: if those who worked one hour received a full day’s pay, then those who worked three, six, nine, and twelve hours should receive several day’s pay according to the hours they worked. So it is to be expected that “*when the first came, they thought they would receive more*” (20:10); but to their surprise and consternation, “*each of them also received the usual daily wage.*” It is not surprising that this leads to great unhappiness among those who worked more hours than the first group who had been hired last: “*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.’*” (20:11-12). It strikes them as unfair to give equal pay for unequal amounts of work, especially for those who have laboured all day in the heat and under the scorching sun.

One would expect that when the landowner discovered this discrepancy he would apologize to the workers and make certain that they were each paid according to the hours they worked as justice would demand. But the landowner’s response takes the labourers – and the readers – by surprise:

- “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 the 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?” – 20:13-15.

According to the landowner (who has taken one of the disgruntled workers aside), the point in dispute is not the making of an unfair contract or failure to follow through on its terms. The real issue is whether the landowner was unfair in paying a full day’s wage to those only hired for one hour. But according to him justice is not violated if the landowner, having met contractual obligations, chooses to be generous. After defending his actions, he turns the tables and challenges those who are unhappy with this decision to justify their own responses: “*Or are you envious because I am generous?*” The literal translation of this phrase is “*Or is your eye evil because I am good?*” “Evil eye” is a Semitic idiom that describes someone who is envious, grudging, or lacking in generosity; the landowner’s question may also be understood as asking “*do you begrudge my generosity?*”

- “The injustice lies instead with the grumbling labourers, who have become envious of the others. Envy is not simply jealousy, which is the desire to attain or possess what another person has. Envy is the sin of being upset at another’s good fortune. Scripture traces its beginning back to the devil himself: “*through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.*” [Wisdom 2:24].” – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

The fact that the landowner directed his manager to have those who were chosen last to be the first to be paid was not by accident; it was the moment when those who had been “irrelevant” all their lives finally became relevant, the time when they were not the last to be noticed but were the first ones who came forward in the presence of the entire crowd. As they had stood for hours in the marketplace unnoticed and unchosen, they might have begun to lose hope of not only finding employment that day but of living their lives in the shadows, constantly being pushed to the sidelines, spending their entire existence on the margins. But when the landowner sees them, not only does he ask them why they are still standing there but invites them into his vineyards and generously provides what they needed for daily living – not because they had earned or deserved it, but because the landowner chose to be generous to those who had probably never experienced such grace in their marginalized lives.

- “No one is so high or can rise so high that they need no longer fear that they may be made the lowest. Again, no one has fallen so low or can fall so low that there is no hope of their becoming the highest, for by this all merit is reduced to nothing and God’s mercy alone is praised, and it is firmly decreed that ‘the last shall be first and

the first last.’ But in saying, ‘the last shall be first,’ he takes from you all despair.” – Martin Luther, 1525.

Jesus’ closing statement about this great reversal brings us back to the beginning of the parable, in which he uses this story to teach his followers about life in the kingdom of heaven, where the Lord reigns who proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah that “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*” (Isaiah 55:8). It is this great reversal that Mary the mother of Jesus celebrates in her hymn in which she rejoices that the Lord has “*brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty*” (Luke 1:52-53). It is the redefinition of “blessed” that is at the heart of Jesus’ Beatitudes, where he proclaims to the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount that true blessedness comes to those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful and pure in heart. Those who have been irrelevant, marginalized, unnoticed and unchosen will now know that in the kingdom of heaven they may “*rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:12).

Jesus’ parable also deals with resentment towards others who have actually received grace one affirms in theory but find objectionable in reality. As we approach our celebration of Thanksgiving, we acknowledge that “*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; so thank the Lord for all his love*” (ELW Hymn 681). We affirm Luther’s explanation of the First Article of the Creed that God provides all the blessings of creation to all people “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*” (Small Catechism). We may embrace the Lutheran doctrine of justification by grace through faith, acknowledging that we are saved not by our own understanding or strength but solely through God’s love for us and our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ; for “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5). Yet we often find ourselves living and thinking in ways that contradict this faith we confess; we believe that we deserve more if we have been faithful longer, or worked harder, or been more diligent in living according to Christ’s commandments. Those who toiled all day in the scorching heat may not have objected to the grace others had received, but by expecting that they themselves would receive more they reject that others had been made equal to them. They believe that they have what they possess by justice; others have been made equal by grace. Their objection to the Lord’s gracious acceptance of others as equals alienates them from the Lord who desires to shower blessings upon them as well, so that when the landowner speaks, he addresses them with the distancing title “friend” rather than as a “brother” or “sister.”

- “The parable invites reflection on the sovereignty of the good God, the one with whom there can be no bargaining because God is the creator and sovereign. Grace is always ‘amazing grace’; grace that can be calculated and expected is no longer grace.” – M. Eugene Boring.

Those who are labeled “irrelevant” are not confined to the final picks in professional sports drafts; there are people all around us who live lives on the margins, unnoticed and unselected. But our Lord Jesus Christ never sees another person in such a manner, because all people are chosen and precious in the eyes of our Lord, all people are worthy of God’s blessings and God’s love, all people are relevant because God has declared them to be relevant. Jesus came to seek out the lost, the lonely, the forgotten; in the kingdom of heaven there are no margins or dark corners where anyone can be lost or forgotten, because the light of Christ cast out all darkness and all who are loved by our Lord and Saviour are chosen and precious. In the words of St. Paul, “*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.*” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

- “The same God who created the heavens and the earth has the power to bridge the great chasm that separates him from his creatures. He will reconcile, he will forgive, no matter what obstacles his prodigal children put in his way ... Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and there is nothing I can do to make God love me less. I am the one Jesus loves.” – Philip Yancey.

While no one would refer to Brock Purdy as “Mr. Irrelevant” after he proved them wrong on the football field, too many people are burdened with this label because of the way others may look upon them. But the good news of our faith is that in the eyes of God all are blessed, all are loved, all are relevant; because in the eyes of God we are “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people*” (1 Peter 2:9). No matter how we may be seen by others, in the eyes of our Lord we are chosen, we are precious, we are relevant – because we are children of God.

Amen.