



Sept. 20, 2020 Mt. 20: 1-16 & Ex. 16:2-15

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ENTERING THE SCENE:

In Jesus' day things were different. "the system was extremely difficult for peasants and small farmers. Not only did they have to meet the demands of the elite, they also had to supply their own household's needs through their own production and through barter or purchase, as well as ensure sufficient livestock and seed for the next year, while at the mercy of weather, soil quality, political events, the whims of the elite. If the yield could not sustain a household, some left to eke out a living in the city, perhaps as day laborers (especially during planting and harvest, as in Mt. 20: 1-6, or in some service or trade employment. The system meant that many peasants lived constantly close to famine and subsistence, with poor nutrition, poor health, endless hard work, and perpetual vulnerability."

How does knowing this affect your understanding of the parable?

Carter, Warren. [Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations](#) Harrisburg, PA. Trinity Press. International. 2001. Pg. 47

Mt. 20: 1-16

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a **landowner** who went out **early** in the morning to **hire** men to **work** in his **vineyard**. 2 He agreed to **pay** them a **denarius** for the day and sent them into his **vineyard**. 3 About the **third** hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace **doing nothing**. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my **vineyard**, and I will **pay** you whatever is **right**.' 5 So they went. "He went out again about the **sixth** hour and the **ninth** hour and did the same thing. 6 About the **eleventh** hour he went out and found still others **standing around**. He asked them, 'Why have you been **standing** here all day long **doing nothing**?' 7 Because **no one has hired us**,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my **vineyard**.' 8 When **evening** came, the **owner** of the **vineyard** said to his **foreman**, 'Call the **workers** and **pay** them their wages, beginning with the **last ones hired** and going on to the first.' 9 The **workers** who were **hired** about the **eleventh** hour came and each received a **denarius**. 10 So when those came who were **hired first**, they **expected** to receive **more**. But each one of them also received a **denarius**. 11 When they received it, they began to **grumble** against the **landowner**. 12 These men who were **hired last** worked only **one hour**,' they said, 'and you have made them **equal** to us who have borne the burden of the **work** and the **heat** of the day.' 13 But he answered one of them, '**Friend**, I am not being **unfair** to you. Didn't you **agree** to **work** for a **denarius**?' 14 Take your **pay** and go. I want to give the man who was **hired last** the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the **right** to do what I want with my own money? Or are you **envious** because I am **generous**?' 16 So the **last** will be **first**, and the **first** will be **last**."

DISCUSSION QUESTION: By paying the last hired first, Jesus sets up a teaching moment. What lesson have you learned from this parable?

PRAYER: Teacher Jesus, you reach for every conceivable way to stretch my understanding of God's unconditional love. I find myself coming to this parable with different responses each time I encounter it. When I am feeling secure, I celebrate that everyone has enough and marvel at God's generosity. When I am feeling afraid or unappreciated, I find my first response like a two year old screaming "that's not fair". Help me to grow into a secure adult understanding of what God is teaching me through you in this parable. Amen.

WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

LANDOWNER / OWNER: Using first century examples Jesus tries to get people to “think out of the box” of customary thinking. He often does this by setting up exaggerated examples to make a point.

What is your first response to this parable? How does Jesus help you to think out of “the box”?

EARLY / THIRD / SIXTH / NINTH / ELEVENTH / EVENING / ONE HOUR: Our story starts out early in the morning. Each shift received the same pay, making all equal to one hours work.

What implication does this have for what it is like in God’s reality? Do you like the implication? When did you enter the workforce of the vineyard?

HIRE / HIRED: The landowner is intimately involved with the vineyard and the workers hired.

Do you experience the “landowner” as personally involved with you and your life?

WORK / WORKERS / HEAT: Some saw themselves lucky to be hired at all, others see themselves as abused and undervalued.

Was your first response to this story one of unfairness or of generosity?

VINEYARD: Scripture often compares Israel as God’s vineyard. Today Jesus might have used the office, home or factory as an example.

Do you see your place of work as God’s vineyard? If so, what insight does this parable bring to that place?

PAY / DENARIUS: The standard days wage for unskilled labor was a denarius. It was a living wage.

What is a standard day’s wages for unskilled labor today? Is it a living wage? If not, what would the employer have to do to come in line with the point of this parable?

DOING NOTHING / STANDING AROUND: Those available for hire went to an arranged site and waited for someone to hire them. Evidently, people arrived at this site on different times of the day.

What time of day did you arrive to offer yourself to work in the vineyard? Was this the first place you put yourself out there this day?

If you came later in the day, what kept you from coming earlier?

RIGHT / UNFAIR: The first group hired was told that they would get the standard wage for the day. All others were told that they would get what was fair.

Even though all got what was ‘right’, some thought what they received was unfair. What standard were they using?

NO ONE HAS HIRED US: When questioned about their standing around, the last group indicates their willingness to work, just a lack of opportunity.

What opportunities do you have to help with the harvest of the kingdom? Is there anything keeping you from helping at this time? If so, what is it?

FOREMAN: The foreman does as he is told without question.

What impression might the owner make on the foreman? What lesson did the disciples (who were always looking for rewards) receive?

HIRED FIRST / HIRED LAST: Matthew’s Jewish community probably saw themselves in the first group, and the gentile community the last.

If you were Matthew, dealing with interchurch rivalry, how could this parable help you?

EXPECTED: Expectations arise whenever hope exists.

If the foreman had paid the laborers beginning with the first and then going down to the last, how might this story be different? What point is Jesus making about God by setting things up this way?

MORE: Those hired first were assured of having enough to take care of their families. The devout are most susceptible, because they often think they deserve more.

What lies behind this kind of thinking? Do you struggle with this temptation?

GRUMBLE: Frustration = grumbling. Grumbling bring on resentment. Resentment is a form of violence.

If you would have been one of the early workers, do you think you would also have been a grumbler?

EQUAL: The owner valued all equally. If the growth of God's kingdom is our primary goal the parable makes sense. *Can you rejoice in the knowledge that all are equal in God's sight?*

FRIEND: In the original language the word used was *hetaire*. It is a term of friendly remonstrance. *What term do you use when you need to bring someone around and yet keep his or her friendship?*

AGREE: The owner countered the objections by reminding the grumblers of their agreement. *Do you think that they then came around and were able to rejoice with the others good fortune? If not, why not?*

ENVIIOUS: The life of envy needs the rejection of others to flourish. It often hates the good another has. *When you think there is only so much of something, do you fall prey to this kind of thinking? If God's love is a gift as Jesus teaches, is there any need for envy?*

GENEROUS: Some translations use the word merciful instead of generous. The owner valued the well-being of the laborers to the point of wanting them all to have enough. Which word works best for you? *Is your God a generous/merciful God, or would you prefer simply a just God instead?*

PARALLEL TEXTS: Mt. 20:16 // Mt. 19: 30;

OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK: Is. 55:6-9; [Ps. 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18](#); Phil. 1:20-24, 27; Mt. 20: 1-16; Revised Common Lectionary: Ex. 16: 2-15; [Ps. 105: 1-6, 37-45](#); Phil. 1: 21-30; Mt. 20: 1-16;

SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:

When we approach the parable of the vineyard workers with justice as our concern, an interesting thing happens. It turns out there are different kinds of justice. On the one hand, there is commutative justice, which governs the fairness of contract agreements, for instance. And then there is distributive justice, which concerns itself with the equitable distribution of goods in a society. And in a strange way, both of these are met in the parable. Pg. 182-3. Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle A 2014. To order contact [Carol Oberfoell](#)

The more you are aware, the more you are able to help something new arise. The first thing to remember as you're confronting any situation that looks like two irreducible binaries is that the resolution, the manifestation of love, is already there in the situation, but you need to find it. Third force is there because the Trinity is real. And if you are alert to it, you will be able to find it. Cynthia Bourgeault

Deep within we long for unity because, at the most fundamental level, we are already one. We belong to one another because we have the same source of love; the love that flows through the trees is the same love that flows through my being. . . . We are deeply connected in this flow of love, beginning on the level of nature where we are the closest of kin because the earth is our mother. Ilia Delio

Jesus radiated hope through his declaration of the promises of God. The God of Jesus is characterized by extravagance, surprise, and superabundance. Our boats are suddenly overflowing with fish after a night of fruitless labor; like the tardy vineyard worker, we are heaped with more reward than we have earned;5 we discover that nobody is excluded from the feast despite our apparent unworthiness. The only appropriate response to this promising God is hope, which abandons the human heart to trust in the giver of such overwhelming, freely given bounty: "Hope is a radical, unquestioning openness to the breaking in of God's future." Eschatology is not only a study of the last things—that is to say, death and the life beyond death—but it is concerned with hope in the goodness of a future vision, grounded in what is real in the present. Hope is demanding; it requires a continual relinquishing of the present in order to receive the future. Passivity is not a possibility because the future is only built on the work of the present: "Hope realizes that the arrival of the future requires our energetic involvement in its coming. Hope withers when it loses its connection to nature, to time and place, and to the need for action here and now." Hope is only real because it is grounded in love. Pgs. 148-8. Macintyre, Margaret. *The Cosmic Pilgrim*. Eugene, OR. WIPF & Stock Pub. 2010

In the [Gospel of Thomas](#) we find: 'Jesus said, "the man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of love, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become one and the same'. Saying 4.

In Scripture, we see that Jesus teaches that, although God's kingdom will establish the right order, it will not be simply based on human standards of justice and on strict reward and punishment. The parable of the laborers in the field who enter the work force at different times (Mt. 20: 1-16) makes clear that eschatological celebration will not be a simple *quid pro quo*, since, because of the owner's generosity, all are paid the same, even though some worked only a short time. Aristotle would never be able to understand such a parable; rather, he would have insisted on strict justice. Pg. 43. Harrington, Daniel—Keenan, James [Jesus and Virtue Ethics](#). NY. Sheed & Ward Book. 2002.

In the end, Jesus simply says that the community of believers in him, the people of the Gospel way of life, who are willing to risk taking him who is the Word at his word are his Church. Pg. 150. Parr, Raymond. [Process Person Presence](#). Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1990.

We want merit pay, and not minimum wage. Fr. Robert Beck

Ireneaus, Bishop of Lyons during the final quarter of the 2nd century, was dealing with the development of thought called Gnosticism. In attacking the **Valentinian Gnostics** he uses this parable in chapter one, section three, vs. 4, to refute one of their claims. Ehrman, Bart. After the New Testament. NY:Oxford Univ. Press. 1999. Pg. 198.

What frightens and frees us simultaneously about this new and alien kingdom of God which Jesus preached and told of is the simple fact that it is God's and not our own. That is a dark menace to the complacency and contentment of those who flourish under the kingdoms of this world; a shining vision of release and new beginnings to the victims of the present order; and perhaps also a mocking rebuke to the programs, projects, and pride of those who hope to create a new order by themselves. Page 23.

Lewis, Alan E. Between Cross and Resurrection. Grand Rapids, MI. Eerdmans. 2001.

Jesus may be telling us that rewards may not be handed out in God's domain in relation to time devoted to merit accumulated. God rewards according to the divine concepts of equity. The Holy One works in a different way. God's gracious, merciful love is bestowed equally on those the Eternal chooses. We should not be jealous or envious; however, no one will receive less than what he or she expected. In addition to the notion of divine reward, this parable reflected also the principle of grace, which was so important to Jesus. Even if one does not repent, there is divine grace, which will overcome the divine wrath. God's mercy will prevail over God's anger. Page 166. Bruteau, Beatrice. Jesus through Jewish Eyes. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books. 2001.

In the end, Jesus simply says that the community of believers in him, the people of the Gospel way of life, who are willing to risk taking him who is the Word at his word are his Church. Pg. 150. Parr, Raymond. Process Person Presence. Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1990.

Matthew guides the reader to an identity grounded in liminal communitas which includes a radical egalitarianism. This egalitarian way of life overturns the hierarchical household code fundamental to first-century life. Pg. 22.

Carson, Timothy L. Liminal Reality and Transformational Power. NY. Univ. Press of Amer. 1997.

Jealousy arises easily in our hearts. ..In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the workers who worked the while day are jealous that those who came in at the eleventh hour received the same pay as they did. But the landowner says, "Why should you be envious because I am generous?" When we truly enjoy God's unlimited generosity, we will be grateful for what our brothers and sisters receive. Jealousy will simply have no place in our hearts. Nouwen, Henri. Bread For the Journey. NY. HarperSanFrancisco. 1977. Page July 6.

(Could this be a sample of today's response?) A GROUP of children have set up a lemonade stand on a hot summer's day. A man walks down the street, buys two glasses of lemonade, gulps them down quickly, and is informed that they are 10 cents apiece. He gives the kids a dollar, says it was delicious lemonade, and walks away. The kids eye him suspiciously. They only asked for 20 cents. What's the matter with him? Why has he given them a dollar? A quarter, even a half-dollar would be all right. A dollar is too much. They go into the house and discuss the matter with their mother. She frowns. What kind of a man is it who gives a dollar for two glasses of lemonade that isn't all that good anyhow? She warns her children not to sell lemonade to the man if he comes back but to come in and tell her if he tries to give them another dollar. She then calls her next-door neighbor and wonders whether the police ought to be informed. If there's a strange man in the neighborhood that is acting crazy paying a dollar for two glasses of lemonade-perhaps the police ought to know about it. Greeley, Andrew. When Life Hurts. Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1988. Page 47.

Such a system was extremely difficult for peasants and small farmers. Not only did they have to meet the demands of the elite, they also had to supply their own household's needs through their own production and through barter or purchase, as well as ensure sufficient livestock and seed for the next year, while at the mercy of weather, soil quality, political events, the whims of the elite. If the yield could not sustain a household, some left to eke out a living in the city, perhaps as day laborers (especially during planting and harvest, as in Mt. 20: 1-6, or in some service or trade employment. The system meant that many peasants lived constantly close to famine and subsistence, with poor nutrition, poor health, endless hard work, and perpetual vulnerability.

Carter, Warren. Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations Harrisburg, PA. Trinity Press. International. 2001. Pg. 47.

"Consider who you were and endeavor to know yourself, which is the most difficult point of knowledge imaginable. The knowledge of yourself will keep you from vanity." – Miguel de Cervantes,

20.1–16: The parable of the workers in the vineyard. 1: His vineyard, Israel (21.33; Isa 5; Jer 12.1–4). 2: Daily wage, Gk "denarius" (18.28; 20.10; 22.19). 8: When evening came, laborers were to be paid on the day they performed the work (Lev 19.13; Deut 24.14–15). Owner, Gk "kyrios," "Lord" (cf. m. Avot 2.14). Beginning with the last, the owner sets up the first hired to believe they will receive more than those hired last. 12: You have made them equal to us, the issue is not when one follows Jesus, but that one does so. 13: Friend, not necessarily indicating friendliness (22.12; 26.50). Rabbinic sources offer a similar story of equal wages for differing durations (y. Ber. 2.8). 15: Are you envious, lit., "Is your eye evil?" 16: See Mk 10.31; Lk 13.30. Last will be first, 19.30n. Pg. 36. [The Jewish Annotated New Testament](#)

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Links to all the books mentioned in this guide are on The Ark web site: www.theark1.com

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle A 2014. Pgs. 182-186. To order contact [Carol Oberfoell](#)

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle A 2008. Pgs. 148-151. To order contact [Carol Oberfoell](#)

Beck, Robert. Sunday Homilies: Cycle A 2001. Pgs. 145-149. To order contact [Carol Oberfoell](#)

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/god-doesnt-see-things-our-perspective>