

“What on Earth is Jesus Talking About?!”
A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Fort Collins, Colorado
September 18,
2011

The most curious thing about the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is where we locate ourselves in line. The story sounds quite different from the end of the line, after all, than it does from the front of the line, but isn't it interesting that 99 percent of us hear it from front-row seats? *We* are the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; *we* are the ones who have been cheated. *We* are the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late and all for what? So that some backward householder can come along and start at the wrong end of the line, treating us just like the ne'er-do-wells who do not even get dressed until noon!

That is how most of us hear the parable, but it is entirely possible that we are mistaken about where we are in line.

— Barbara Brown Taylor

Texts: Psalm 105:1-6 & Matthew 20:1-16

I was going to begin the sermon with statistics just released from the most recent U.S. Census, the numbers on poverty. Over 46 million people in our country are living in poverty. That's fifteen percent of the population, nearly one out of every six people. It's worse when it comes to our children: one out of every five is living in poverty. As the number of poor grows, the rich grow richer. The Denver Post reported last week on the collective income of the top one-tenth of one percent of the nation's population.¹ Each earns an annual average of \$5.6 million, while the income of the bottom ninety percent averages around \$31,000 a year. I thought about starting the sermon by pointing to the lines at our local Food Bank, or describing the people – Fort Collins residents, not just the homeless – who are utilizing the services of the Sister Mary Alice Center for Hope.

But I decided not to start with these statistics and images because they're likely to start an argument. Have you noticed? Folks get a little exercised when we talk about the economy and social structures, even church folks. In any case, Jesus has already started an argument by way of the parable he tells this morning. So instead of pointing to the culture in which we find ourselves as the

context for this parable, I'll describe some of the social and economic features of the culture in which Jesus told the parable.

Jesus grew up during a time of extraordinary change in Israel.² This transformation in Israel's way of doing life and community was brought on by Rome, the empire occupying Israel at the time. Rome had turned to Palestine to extend its imperial infrastructure: the cities, roads and ports that linked the empire as one. Ruling in Israel at the time was Herod the Great. Herod was a descendant of the Hasmonean family of priests and kings that ruled Israel before the Roman occupation. Herod undertook an ambitious construction program. Once he began to collaborate with the Romans, he was awarded the title *Governor* and given the authority to rule on Rome's behalf.

Herod built a remarkable palace just south of Bethlehem and an extravagant summer place on the Dead Sea. But those projects pale before two more important construction projects. On Rome's behalf, Herod built a huge port on the Mediterranean Sea and a city, Caesarea, to maintain it. Then, to appease the Israelites and to draw Roman resources to the city of Jerusalem, Herod created a huge plaza around the Temple. But Herod didn't pay much attention to Galilee, where Jesus lived. It was enough that Galilee served as Israel's breadbasket, providing fruit and grain from the fertile land, an abundant supply of fish from the Galilean sea, and the water that flowed from the sea south in the Jordan River.

It was Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, who brought the imperial program to Galilee. Jesus would have been raised in the thick of it. In fact, some scholars think that Joseph and Mary settled in the little Jewish village of Nazareth because, just a few kilometers away, there was still another enormous Roman construction project underway. Antipas was building the city of Sepphoris to house a Roman garrison and a growing Roman population. Joseph and his son, Jesus, could have found work there.

There were at least two devastating effects of the Roman occupation in Galilee – not counting the heavy taxes that were imposed upon the population. Rome sought to urbanize the countryside by transforming Israel's agrarian culture from one of peasant farming to what, today, we would call commercial farming.³ In turn, the sea itself was commercialized. Let me describe it this way. Up until the time of Jesus' childhood, most families would have worked a patch of ground to produce enough food to feed themselves and a little extra to trade with neighbors and share with those in need. Fishers, too. Each fishing family would have had a boat and gone out each day to catch enough to feed themselves along with a little extra to trade for the grain, fruit and vegetables they needed.

But by the time Jesus was a teenager, there were more mouths to feed – not just in Sepphoris, all across the Roman Empire.

Once the crops were being raised – and the sea was being fished – for export, work was rewarded in cash and it wasn't long before the divide between rich and poor grew. Large landowners became the norm, as peasants were put off the land handed down over many generations – land taken because they couldn't pay their taxes or sold because they had incurred other debts in the changing marketplace. Many Galileans became tenant farmers and day laborers, often working the land they'd lost to others. While life was easier for the landowners, they were still beholden to the whim of their occupiers who worshipped gods with an entirely different set of values than the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Historians describe this transformation as the commercialization of an agrarian culture – the culture in which Jesus tells this story.

[Read Matthew 20:1-16.]

It takes about a minute and a half to read the parable. It might have taken Jesus as long as an hour to tell it. That's what Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan thinks. Because, as Crossan reminds us, Jesus was talking with his disciples and others who had gathered to hear his stories and to discuss their meaning. These days, a preacher reads a parable from the pulpit, we expect her to interpret it, to tell us what Jesus meant. This is what preaching, at its worst, has come to – the preacher telling the congregation what Jesus meant, who God is, what faith is all about. This is what coming to church has come to, at its worst: folks expecting the preacher to do all the hard work because they pass on Sunday school where together the church enters into the difficult conversations about the meaning of the text. Jesus expected his listeners to do the hard work. This is why Crossan thinks Jesus' telling of his parables took a lot longer than our reading them. Because, as Crossan says, "a parable is a lure." It attracts discussion, debate and, when told to a group, it can raise the corporate consciousness. In other words, Jesus told these stories to start a conversation.

Imagine somebody in the group responding, one of the day laborers maybe. "What a stupid story. Nobody's ever heard of a generous landowner. They're all greedy jerks." Somebody else saying, "Jesus isn't talking about a landowner. He's talking about God." Another chimes in, "Well, if he's talking about God, all I gotta say is, God doesn't know the first thing about running a business. You can't afford to pay a day-laborer's daily wage to the ones who work for only an hour, especially if you're not going to pay a lot more to the ones who worked out in the heat all day." "No," another says, "and if you've heard the one Jesus tells about the sower, you gotta think God is a lousy farmer, too,

scattering the precious seed everywhere: on the rocky ground, along the path, in the weeds. What a waste!” “Yeah,” the other says, “I never thought of it that way. You’re right. This God Jesus is describing doesn’t know how to treat a dishonest servant either, forgiving not punishing him. And he certainly doesn’t know how to raise a family, throwing a party for a prodigal son instead of beating him with a stick.”

Somebody intervenes and finally asks, “Jesus, what on earth are you talking about?” To which Jesus replies... Oh, Jesus doesn’t reply. Seems like he wants the others to tease out the meaning of this parable. I consulted six of my favorite sources to see what they had to say. Every one of them finds a different meaning in the text. One, Barbara Brown Taylor, suggests that our response to Jesus’ story has a lot to do with our place in the line – near the front or at the back. The day-laborers at the end of the line, there had to be a lot of smiles and rejoicing on their part; they could go home and feed their family. Those at the front of the line, those who’d spent their entire day working the vineyard, I understand their sour faces and grumbling. It doesn’t matter that they receive what they agreed to work for. It simply isn’t fair that the others get as much as they do.

I’m guessing that those of us who are near the head of the line will tend to spiritualize this parable. Talk about the love of God for everybody, God’s generosity when it comes to the spiritual life and spiritual gifts, and how – when you consider the entire sweep of history – we can think of ourselves as those who’ve come into the vineyard, into the church, late in the day. In this way, we get to count ourselves among the grateful in the Jesus’ parable, not the complainers.

But the setting of Jesus’ story isn’t the Temple, where we expect to talk about spiritual things. The setting of this parable is in the marketplace, on the street corner where the suffering gather and where too often greedy landowners take advantage – not all of them, that’s not what I’m saying, but enough of them; where some stand until late in the day, not because they are lazy, but because they hope against hope that somebody might need them for even just an hour’s worth of work so they can take home to their family a handful of fruit and vegetables.

I know one of the day laborers, my friend Mohamed. Mohamed’s in his late twenties. He works the streets of Bethlehem, around the hotels and holy sites, selling cheap souvenirs: scarves and kafias; necklaces for \$5 a piece unless you outlast his sales pitch and offer him a dollar each. Mohamed dropped out of school at age twelve when his father died. He wanted to help his mother and see his brothers and sister stay in school. They’ve stayed in school. All the

while, like the laborers in Jesus' day, Mohamed has suffered the criticism and pity of tourists and the humiliation of those in charge of the permitting process, and the impatience and disdain of those who by way of grace and the culture's blessing have never had to wait in line until the last hour of the day.

Jesus was an amazing storyteller. I'm grateful that the Gospel writers preserved as many of his stories as they did. But I'll tell you what I wish Matthew and the others would have recorded: more of the conversations that followed Jesus' storytelling, the arguments, the insights, the self-discoveries and the transformation. Because I don't think Jesus – when Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower and the one about the dishonest steward and the Parable of the Prodigal Son or this one, about the generous landowner – I don't think Jesus is talking about the next world or a spiritual life unconnected to the material one. Jesus is revealing something important about life on earth, here, now, to those who are given to reflect on life, the way it is, the way it can be; about God's kingdom breaking into all the little kingdoms we've created; about God's way of doing life and economy and politics and international relations; about God's invitation to us to question our ways and to partner with God in his.

This is my take on the parable. I'd like to hear yours.

— Jeff Wright
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¹ *The Denver Post* (p. 10B, 9/16/11)

² A number of contemporary scholars are calling the church's attention to the cultural, religious and political context of Jesus' ministry, among them: John Dominic Crossan (see *First Light: Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, a DVD resource from Living the Questions, a gathering of information from many of his books); N.T. Wright (*The Challenge of Jesus* and his other books); Richard Horsley (*Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*); William Herzog II (*Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation*); Kenneth E. Bailey (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*)

³ Crossan, *First Light*

⁴ *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 105