The Bible and People on the Move

Another Look at Matthew’s Parable of the Day Laborers

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Every day, the vexing parable of Matthew 20:1-16 replays itself in real life for the predominately immigrant and Latino day-labor work force in the United States. Much of what commentators have written about the parable runs against the grain of these experiences. What good news might this parable hold for the church today?

I never heard Father George Nicholson preach about the parable of the day laborers (Matt 20:1-16), but I am convinced that George, the late pastor of St. John Vianney parish in Flushing, New York, came to understand it better than most people I know. Whatever he may or may not have learned about Matthew’s parable during his seminary courses in biblical studies, he certainly understood it differently when in the early nineties he came face to face with the day laborers who gathered each morning along Northern Boulevard hoping for work to support themselves and their families. Despite significant opposition from his own parishioners, he invited the day laborers to gather in the church’s parking lot and welcomed them into the parish center, which became a de facto hiring hall on weekday mornings. George really connected with these men, and his fluency in the language

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of respect more than made up for whatever was lacking in his heavily accented and halting Spanish. As time went on, the day laborers organized themselves, doing what they could to support each other, to understand and protect their rights, and to guard against abuse by employers.

The daily struggle of immigrant laborers across the United States calls us to revisit Matthew’s parable of the day laborers, to read it through the lens of their experience, and to grapple with its meaning for us today.

**Conventional Readings**

The parable of the day laborer (Matt 20:1-16) is the first of three vineyard parables in Matthew’s Gospel, and it is followed by the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28-32) and the parable of the tenant farmers (Matt 21:33-46). Two of these three parables are exclusive to Matthew, for only the parable of the tenant farmers has a parallel in Mark (Mark 12:1-12). Commentators on Matthew 20:1-16 have labored hard at distinguishing the sense of the parable in its literary setting in Matthew’s Gospel from the sense it may have had as a parable of Jesus himself. In so doing, they often focus on the inclusion between Matthew 19:30 (“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” [NAB]) and Matthew 20:16 (“Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last”). This Matthean frame suggests that in its redactional context, the parable has to do with status reversal, even though only the order in which the laborers are paid (v. 8) involves any sort of reversal, with the vineyard owner instructing his foreman to begin with the laborers who were last to be hired (Harrington, 283). Thus, many commentators dismiss verse 16 as a Matthean addition (see Barré, 173–74), since, as Bernard Brandon Scott explains, “the parable does not furnish a good example of the last as first or the first as last” (Scott, 282). Barbara E. Reid identifies the saying in verse 16 as a “floating proverb that is tagged on to various New Testament passages in diverse contexts,” including Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30 in addition to Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 (Reid, 100). Scott points out that when the parable is considered apart from its setting in Matthew, “Most commentators see the accent of the original telling falling on the householder’s graciousness, goodness, or generosity,” but for Scott, “Such a reading involves curious interpretive gymnastics” (Scott, 282).

In his classic study of the parables, Joachim Jeremias turns to Matthew 20:1-16 and asks:

Why does the master of the house give the unusual order that all are to receive the same pay? Why especially does he allow the last to receive a full day’s pay for only an hour’s work? Is this a piece of purely arbitrary injustice? a caprice? a generous whim? Far from it! There is no question here of a limitless generosity, since all receive only an amount sufficient to sustain life, a bare subsistence
wage. . . . Even if, in the case of the last labourers to be hired, it is their own fault that, in a time when the vineyard needs workers, they sit about in the market-place gossiping till late afternoon; even if their excuse that no one has hired them (v. 7) is an idle evasion . . . a cover for their typical oriental indifference, yet they touch the owner’s heart. . . . It is because of his pity for their poverty that the owner allows them to be paid a full day’s wages. In this case the parable does not depict an arbitrary action, but the behaviour of a large-hearted man who is compassionate and full of sympathy for the poor. (Jeremias, 37)

For Daniel J. Harrington, Matthew 20:1-16 becomes “the parable of the good employer.” Explaining that “the traditional title of the parable is ‘the workers in the vineyard,’” Harrington himself maintains that “the laborers are really only foils for the central character who is the householder/master. Therefore some argue that a better title is ‘the good employer’ since he is the main character from start to finish” (Harrington, 284). The point? Harrington suggests that “the parable of the good employer defends Jesus’ special concern for the marginal in Jewish society. . . . Just as it is possible to entitle Luke 15:11-32 the ‘prodigal father,’” instead of the parable of the prodigal son, “so one can call Matthew 20:1-15 the ‘prodigal employer’” (Harrington, 284).

In their Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh present Matthew 20:1-16 as “God as Generous Patron.” They explain that “day laborers were economically among the poorest persons in the society. They were usually landless peasants who had lost their ancestral lands and drifted into cities and villages looking for work. Moreover, loss of land usually meant loss of family and the supporting network that implied. Survival for such people was often a bitter struggle” (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 124). Like most other commentators, Malina and Rohrbaugh read the parable theologically, assuming that the vineyard owner is a stand-in for God, and explaining that correspondence in the light of the dynamics of patron-client relations in the first-century Mediterranean world. While their reading illustrates the severity of the struggle for survival that day laborers faced, Malina and Rohrbaugh foreground the behavior of the owner of the vineyard, who behaves “like a typical Mediterranean patron” (Malina and Rohrbaugh, 125). In another effort to apply the insights of social scientific interpretation to the parable, John H.
Elliott translates Matthew 20:16b as, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” explaining the protests of the early arrivals among the laborers at the wages given the latecomers as an instance of “Evil Eyed envy.” In the end, though, Elliott’s conclusion does not stray far from the theological conclusion of his fellow commentators: “This parable, as initially told by Jesus, was a story illustrating the unlimited favor of God and condemning Evil Eyed envy and invidious comparisons as incompatible with social life governed by the rule of God. God, represented by the householder and the kyrios (20:8), the parable affirms, is good in both his fidelity to his commitments and his generosity” (Elliott, 61).

In his 1988 study of the parable, Puerto Rican Lutheran theologian José David Rodríguez refers to Matthew 20:1-16, “in the tradition of Jeremias,” as “the parable of the Affirmative Action Employer,” explaining:

When I first thought about giving a different title to this story, I considered “The Equal Opportunity Employer.” But after a careful study of its content, I concluded that this would be a mistake. The parable does not provide us with a description of someone who is willing to give equal opportunity to people provided they show the same number of credentials, the same curriculum vitae, or the same experience. The story describes an employer whose criteria go beyond merit to focus on need. (Rodríguez, 423)

Reading the parable through the lens of the Reformation principle of justification by grace through faith, Rodríguez declares: “All that God gives is a product of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives is given out of the goodness of God’s heart; what God gives us is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a product of love” (Rodríguez, 424). What distinguishes Rodríguez’s reading in an important and helpful way from those of many other commentators on this parable is the ethical implication he draws from the parable. Addressing his fellow Lutherans, he insists that “in the Christian church seniority does not necessarily translate into privilege,” urging a welcoming attitude toward members of ethnic groups who are more recent arrivals in the United States and insisting: “We confess that God is an Affirmative Action Employer, and we believe that such a confession ought to become incarnate also in our own employment practices and attitudes towards the poor” (Rodríguez, 424). For Rodríguez, Matthew’s parable of the Affirmative Action employer is a powerful and convincing narrative metaphor for the preferential option for the poor.

**Resisting the Conventional Readings**

In his provocative book, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, William R. Herzog II offers a reading of the parables that resists
the conventional understanding of these narratives as “primers of ethics and theology” (Herzog, 11). He asks: “What if the parables of Jesus were neither theological nor moral stories but political and economic ones? What if the concern of the parables was not the reign of God but the reigning systems of oppression that dominated Palestine in the time of Jesus?” (Herzog, 7). While I would argue that there is no hard and fast distinction between the realm of theological ethics and the realm of politics and economics (for this is the intersection where Catholic social teaching helps us to find our bearings), it is startling to note that Herzog’s chapter on Matthew 20:1-16 is entitled, “Blaming the Victims of Oppression.” Here Herzog concludes that when the original parable was picked up by Matthew, the vineyard came to be understood—in the light of Isaiah 5:1-7—as a metaphor for Israel or the church, and the householder (described in Matt 20:8 as “the lord of the vineyard”) as a metaphor for God, assigning allegorical correspondences that end up dulling the sharp edges of the parable and the dire predicament it depicts. Herzog complains that the identification of the vineyard owner as God by many ancient and modern readers of the parable leads them to “simply pass over the man. So strong is the assumption that he is a God figure that he merits little attention” (Herzog, 84). The details of the characterization of the vineyard owner warrant further attention. For example, “To reinforce the extent of the householder’s holdings, Jesus portrays him as making numerous trips to the agora to hire additional day laborers. His imminent harvest is so great that even he cannot calculate accurately the amount of help needed” (Herzog, 85). Herzog adds:

The successive trips to the agora serve another purpose by reinforcing the unilateral power of the landowner. On his first trip, he apparently bargains with the day laborers, although this bargaining is more like a “take it or leave it” proposition. If he can go to the agora an hour before sundown and still find workers there, those workers have no bargaining power. . . . Far from being generous, then, the householder is taking advantage of an unemployed work force to meet his harvesting needs by offering them work without a wage agreement. (Herzog, 86)

Commentators who fail to question the “generosity” of the vineyard owner pass over details of the parable that call attention to his elite socioeconomic status and the enormous distance between his privileged condition and the miserable state of the day laborers because they take it for granted that he represents God. Herzog observes, “If the owner of the vineyard has been invisible in commentary on this parable, the day laborers have not. They have been the object of every conceivable calumny” (Herzog, 87). Jeremias, for example, dismisses their reply to the vineyard owner’s question in verse 7 (“Why do you stand here idle all day?”) as “a cover for typical oriental indifference” (Jeremias, 37). In fact, the answer they give is simple and straightforward: “Because no one has hired us.” The grumbling against the
landowner by those who worked the longest is taken as unjustified envy at the good fortune of others and not as a legitimate complaint at the way in which their work has been significantly undervalued.

Another Look at the Parable

A late-model black Lexus pulls up and is quickly surrounded by several men. Raising his index finger, the driver indicates that the job requires just one. The worker who reaches the car first is motioned in; the transaction takes less than a minute. Where he will go, what kind of work he will do, how much—or if—he will get paid, the worker knows not. For the day laborer, as well as the employer, uncertainty is part of the underground labor market. Usually Spanish-speaking and marked by well-worn, often paint-splattered clothes, the men who work as day laborers can be found outside home-improvement stores, small convenience stores and on busy street corners. . . . At a site in Anaheim, workers exchange stories like troops showing off battle scars. . . . Speaking in Spanish, nearly all recount sad, scary or just plain strange dealings with employers. Daniel Tomas said he and another man were hired by a woman to help the family move. When she discovered that her purse was missing, the woman’s husband returned to the site and took the workers to a police station. They were soon released, Tomas says, for a lack of proof. “They blame you for anything . . . something missing, we’re blamed,” says Tomas. A worker from Guerrero, Mexico, recounted the time he received $160 for seven full days of work. “The owner didn’t like the way the work was done,” says Faustino Molina, 35, who was hired by a subcontractor. “The guy says, ‘If I lose, so do you,’” said Molina, who was paid by check. “And checks always bounce or the accounts end up being closed,” chimes in Tomas. (Martinez 2004)

This report from the Los Angeles Times is no parable, no morality tale. It is a snapshot of the day-in, day-out struggle for survival by tens of thousands of twenty-first-century day laborers across the United States. According to the January 2006 National Day Labor Study, “On any given day, approximately 117,600 workers are either looking for day-labor jobs or working as day laborers” (Valenzuela et al., i). Who are these day laborers? According to the study:

The day-labor workforce in the United States is predominantly immigrant and Latino. Most day laborers were born in Mexico (59 percent) and Central America (28 percent), but the third-largest group (7 percent) was born in the United States. Two-fifths (40 percent) of day laborers have lived in the United States for more than 5 years. Three-quarters (75 percent) of the day-labor force are undocumented migrants. About 11 percent of the undocumented day-labor workforce has a
pending application for adjustment of their immigration status. (Valenzuela et al., iii)

They find work—when they can—as construction laborers, gardeners, landscapers, painters, roofers, house cleaners, carpenters, drywall installers, farm workers, dishwashers, car washers, and cooks. What challenges do they face? According to the authors of the study:

• Day laborers regularly suffer employer abuse. Almost half of all day laborers experienced at least one instance of wage theft in the two months prior to being surveyed. In addition, 44 percent were denied food/water or breaks while on the job.

• Workplace injuries are common. One in five day laborers has suffered a work-related injury, and more than half of those who were injured in the past year did not receive medical care. More than two-thirds of injured day laborers have lost time from work.

• Merchants and police often unfairly target day laborers while they seek work. Almost one-fifth (19 percent) of all day laborers have been subjected to insults by merchants, and 15 percent have been refused services by local businesses. Day laborers also report being insulted (16 percent), arrested (9 percent) and cited (11 percent) by police while they search for employment. (Valenzuela et al., iii)

For George Nicholson and the day laborers in the parking lot at St. John Vianney, much of what commentators have written about Matthew 20:1-16 runs against the grain of lessons they learned the hard way. Every day this parable replays itself in real life for immigrant laborers across the United States. The Web site of the anti-immigrant organization deceptively named “Federation for American Immigration Reform [FAIR]” claims:

The proliferation of day laborer hiring sites has paralleled the explosion of the illegal alien problem in the United States. What was once largely a problem confined to large city sweatshops and seasonal crop agriculture has expanded enormously as illegal aliens have spread across the country into the meat processing industry, construction, assembly-line work, services such as landscaping, and all sorts of casual day labor jobs.

In words that are less subtle and no less insulting that Jeremias’s characterization of the last-hired day laborers in the parable as a matter of “typical oriental indifference,” the Federation for American Immigration Reform alleges: “In some areas, these informal hiring sites have caused traffic disturbances, and the lack of sanitary facilities has often led to public urination. Nearby established businesses have
often complained to the police that the gatherings drive away their clients. Other common complaints include public drunkenness and harassment of pedestrians.”

**Seeing the Face of Christ in the Immigrant Laborer**

For day laborers who regularly face employer abuse, the words of the vineyard owner to his foreman in verse 8 of the parable represent a familiar tactic: “Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.” By instructing his foreman to start with the most recently hired and to end with those who had labored in the vineyard all day, the vineyard owner is teaching his employees a lesson. Yet the lesson is not about his generosity or his magnanimity, but about his own power, about their dependence on him, and about the insignificance of their own toil. This is not a matter of gifts or grace, but of a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work: “These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat” (v. 12). When the workers complain, the vineyard owner deploys yet another altogether familiar strategy: he singles out one of their number and takes him to task in front of the others. Herzog explains, “‘Friend’ (hetaire) is not a friendly term. It is condescending and subtly reinforces their different social stations, yet it feigns courtesy. If he were addressing a social equal, he would have used phile” (Herzog, 92). Making an example of this laborer, the vineyard owner dismisses him: “Take what is yours and go.” As Herzog observes, “The spokesperson has been banned, shunned, blackballed, or blacklisted; he will not likely find work in that neighborhood again” (Herzog, 93). For the rest, the unspoken message is unmistakable: what happened to him could just as well have happened to any of them. Behind the vineyard owner’s rhetorical question, “Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?” lurks a capricious and impulsive conscience. Today’s immigrant day laborers know altogether too well that their employers do as they wish with their money. How hard it is to recognize the face of a gracious and generous God in this figure of the vineyard owner!

If instead, like George Nicholson, we see the face of Christ in the faces of today’s immigrant day laborers, then what lessons does Matthew’s vexing parable hold for us today? Perhaps another text from Matthew’s Gospel can help: “Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed
you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you? And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me’” (Matt 25:37-40).

References


