

Sermon "It's All About Compassion."  
Sunday, September 18, 2011  
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector  
Christ Church, Shaker Heights  
Proper 20 Year A: Ex. 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

*Ask people's responses to the parable?*

A lot of people have very negative responses to parables like the one we have just heard of the *Laborers in the Vineyard*. The story defies our understanding of what we believe is just and fair behavior. Who in their right mind, we think, would pay the same exact wage to someone who worked for one hour as is paid to someone who worked twelve hours? No MBA worth their salt would ever run a business that way. No labor union leader would ever advocate for that in contract negotiations. This may be one thing these two, often adversarial groups can come to agreement on!

But Jesus tells these disturbing parables that jangle our pre-conceived notions of what is right and wrong, intentionally. Known as Parables of Great Reversal, they are meant to turn things upside down and inside out. They are intended to shock us, to wake us out of our stupor, to remind us, as God told the prophet Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." (Is.55:8)

Preachers face a dilemma in addressing these parables, as well. They demand a choice on our part: do we address the hard truths the parables of great reversal proclaim; truths that will surely necessitate the co-mingling of topics like religion and politics, religion and economics, religion and the secular world . . . or not? Preachers hesitate choosing the former for fear of annoying people in the pews who frequently believe that religious faith is a private endeavor and that preachers should never address these other realms of human life.

Reluctant to agitate their flock by crossing those boundaries, preachers tone down the parable's message to make it palatable for the hearers, and easier for themselves in the meet and greet line after worship. Frequently they do this by relying on what they believe is the Gospel's safety valve, which is the theology of "the Kingdom of God."

Take for example today's lesson, which begins with Jesus saying, "For the kingdom of God is like..." This setting up of a simile allows the preacher to lead the listener to believe that what Jesus is actually saying in the parable is like nothing in our real world, but rather some unattainable ideal which exists only in the by and by of God's Kingdom. After all—wink, wink—no sensible, logical person would pay laborers who worked widely different hours the same amount of pay.

This manipulation of the theology of the Kingdom of God gets the preacher off the hook with the challenging parables of Great Reversal. Don't worry, folks, this startling, irrational world order of the Kingdom only arrives with the Second Coming of Jesus, and therefore is not applicable to the here and now; it bears no relevance to our current circumstances.

NOT!

That's a disingenuous belief because it conveniently avoids the very words of Jesus who said, "For in fact the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:21) It is here and it is now. Those of you who have been around this parish a while know which approach I tend to err on the side of, so here we go!

Hearing the parable of the *Laborers in the Vineyard* this morning, with its vivid imagery of all these laborers standing idly in the market place, wanting for work, I can't help but immediately think of the tens of millions of Americans in our current depressed economy who are unemployed, underemployed, or have not been employed for such a long time they have fallen off the statistical records.

And hearing this parable, I can't help but be reminded that the prevailing approach to this cancerous unemployment by our elected leaders, in all levels of government and from both political parties, has been at best neglectful and at times belligerent and abusive. The unemployed laborers of today have become a class of people who are not considered worthy of being noticed any longer; not by elected leaders, not by the owners and managers of business and not by us. They have been left behind.

As the op-ed writer, Paul Krugman wrote in his column in *The Times* the other day, "compassion is [now] out of fashion."

As a follower of Jesus, Krugman's words during this time of great human need and suffering are heart-rending to me. Is it even possible that people who are enduring immense fear and suffering as they uncontrollably spiral downward in the current economy, losing their jobs, their homes, their savings, their dignity, self-respect and ultimately their hope for the future, is it even possible that these people don't evoke the slightest compassion in us? Is it possible that we have become so callous as to feel the unemployed don't warrant our united effort and mutual sacrifice as a nation to alleviate the circumstances causing this anguish?

Has the individualistic cult of "me" that permeates our culture finally eradicated our ability to feel compassion and be moved to act on behalf of tens of millions of our neighbors in such dire straits?

Think of the corrosive impact that the current rate of unemployment has on society, on family life, on the fabric of our communities, on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-

being of those impacted by it. Think of the great difficulty of several members of our own families as they experienced being un- or under-employed.

Think of the ramifications the current unemployment rate has on all of us and then try to tell me that Jesus is not calling us to be passionately concerned and involved in addressing these ills. Try to tell me that the Church should not be involved in economic justice – a topic the Bible addresses over three hundred times. Go ahead, try to convince me that the faith community should not raise its voice in the public square, in the political realm, but rather keep its head buried in the sand of Sunday morning worship, safely contained within our institutional walls.

Those responses may be the safe, polite and easy ones, but they are surely not what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus knows our human proclivity toward denying the harsh realities of life that prevent justice from rolling on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24) That's why he tells these shocking parables; to move us to compassion and action. So let's examine this one.

First of all, the story of the *Laborers in the Vineyard* is not a story about socialism or subsidizing people who want something for nothing; it's about giving free handouts. Rather, the parable is meant to convey God's grace-filled compassion for those who want to work but can't find work. When the landowner goes out several times during the day and asks those in the marketplace "Why are you standing here idle all day?" The men reply, "Because no one has hired us," meaning, "Because you have not hired us. It's not our fault that we are idle. We are willing to work. We want to work. But neither you nor anyone else has hired us. And if no one hires us our families will starve."

One of the most tragic situations in life is a person who wants to work but can't find work. It is a devastating circumstance to find oneself in. I read a quote as I prepared for this sermon that stated that one of the saddest lines in all of Shakespeare's plays is, "Othello's occupation is gone." It was as equally sad a statement for those men in the marketplace. It is as equally tragic for the unemployed in today's economy.

And so, it is out of compassion that the landowner gave them work; that he found work for them to do.

It is equally out of compassion that regardless of how many hours a man worked, the landowner gives each worker the usual daily wage, which would have been a denarius. It was not a great wage, mind you, but in that day it was the bare minimum to provide enough food and the essentials of life for a family. In other words when paid a denarius, the workers and their families would not starve, they would not be foreclosed on, they would maintain their dignity and self-respect.

In his compassion and generosity the landowner indicates that it is more important to worry about providing the basics of human life for all people, than it is to treat people as disposable commodities. This landowner is no CEO who reaps millions in salary and stock options while mandating that others lose their jobs.

Ultimately this parable is about the justice and righteousness that comes through compassion for the least among us. It informs us that in God's economy every person is entitled to decent work, every person is entitled to a living wage and to live with dignity. God's economy is for all people, here, now, today. It is not some pie in the sky fantasy that will come in the by and by.

God's economy is built on compassion and God tells us that our economy needs to be as well. It is this very compassion of God that God calls us to emulate and offer as a witness to others – especially those in politics and business—so we can heal the wretched brokenness of our current circumstances. This is the way of the Gospel. This is the way of being a follower of Jesus Christ. This is the way of life.

*Amen.*