

Hespeler, 20 September 2020 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus' Parable of the Workers in the Field is one that everybody seems to think they know what it means. The landowner, people confidently explain, represents God and we are the workers in some sense. The money paid to the workers represents what God gives to us, whether it's salvation or some other spiritual gift. That's what the parable means, we say, and then we go on to interpret and apply the parable to our lives within that particular matrix.

But what if that is wrong? I mean, Jesus never says that that is how we're supposed to read the parable. What he says is, **"For the kingdom of heaven is like..."** and then explains the whole scenario. It is up to us to figure out how what happens in the story is like the kingdom of God. Well, I've got to tell you that some of the recent events that we have lived through have made me look at this particular parable in a new light. I have a new perspective on it. What if we were meant to find the kingdom someplace else in this story?

For the kingdom of heaven is like some business owners who went out early in the morning to hire labourers to work in their grocery stores. You see, they had a bit of a problem. There was a crisis going on in society in the form of a deadly illness. Everything was getting shut down to prevent transmission and the people had been given instructions for their own safety not to go out unless it was absolutely essential. But these businesses dealt in essential things so the owners had an extraordinary opportunity. If only they could manage to get what they had out to the people, they could make lots of money!

But they needed people to work in their stores to stock the shelves, to collect the money and to keep all of the customers (who were in a bit of a fragile state) happy. And so they started with the workers that they had and they said to them, "Go out and do the work you have always done because you should be grateful to work when other people don't even have jobs. We will pay you what we have always contracted with you to pay.

And, let me tell you, over the following weeks those business owners just cleaned up! People flooded into their stores and many of them bought up insane quantities of their products. People were literally fighting with each other to pay exorbitant prices to buy more toilet paper than they would probably need for the next year! And, as the profits came rolling in, the owners were laughing all the way to the bank.

But they had a problem. They couldn't do any of this without the labourers who worked in their stores. In fact, in order to not miss out on even



more profits, they needed more people to keep functioning and to fill a growing backlog of online orders. But the problem was that their message that people should be grateful to work when others didn't even have jobs wasn't quite working for them anymore.

The workers were noticing things. They were noticing, for example, that some people – people who were *not* considered to be essential workers – were actually being paid to stay home and keep the community safe from the virus. And they were being given an amount of money that was considered to be enough to live on. You might call it a basic income. And those people were being paid more or less the same as these essential workers. And, what's more, the labourers were becoming more and more aware that they were dealing with the actual dangers of working at such a time while the owners weren't risking much of anything while they got all these profits. So you can imagine that some of them were not quite feeling as if they should just be grateful to be paid anything.

And so the owners said, "Let us make sure that everyone knows that these labourers of ours are being heroic. Let us thank them and praise them. And the workers did appreciate being appreciated and, for a time, this made it easier to retain workers and even hire some new ones so that the profits could be protected.

But still it was not enough and the owners started to realize that there was more profit out there that they could seize if only they managed to maintain and expand their operations. And for that they needed to maintain and even expand their workforce. But this was a very delicate thing because they did not want to let the workers know that they needed them. They liked it far more when the workers felt like they were depending on the owners to give them a basic income – to give them what they needed to survive.

And so they came up with a plan. They would pay all of their workers more money – pay a whole extra \$2 an hour. But they would be very clear in their messaging. This was hazard pay. It was hero pay and it was only because of the truly extraordinary risks of the situation. No, it was not because the owners needed the workers. It was because they were kind and generous. And they said, **"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"**

And so, for a while, the workers bore the burden of the difficult days of the pandemic and the scorching heat of the fear and anxiety that came with it until finally came the day when it was over.

Now, what was over? It wasn't the crisis. The disease still raged on and the dangers of it spreading still existed. But suddenly, at some point, something changed. It was as if someone flicked off a switch. The owners decided that, though the dangers still existed, the danger pay was no longer necessary.

You see, they understood. They understood that if they gave it to their labourers for too long, those labourers would stop seeing it as a special

expression of generosity and start seeing it as something they had earned. They couldn't have that. So, though profits were still up thanks to the ongoing emergency and the hard work of the labourers, the emergency pay was stopped.

At the same time, it was like the very idea of the heroism of the front line workers grew weaker and growing numbers of people were only too happy to take out their frustrations for how bad things were upon them – especially on those who asked them to behave in responsible ways and do things like wear masks. It seemed that the labourers in the grocery stores ended up more or less where they had been at the beginning.

Now this is the question I would like to ask you, where in this story are we supposed to find the kingdom of heaven?

The parable of the labourers in the field is a story that is completely steeped in the historical circumstances in which Jesus lived. He lived in an agricultural society that had been founded with the ideal that every Israelite man should have a piece of land for the support of his own family. But, by the time Jesus came along, that was no longer the case. The land had been increasingly consolidated into the hands of a few wealthy landowners and huge numbers of people had been dispossessed of their lands.

This created a strange kind of dependence. The landowners had no means to gather all of the produce of their land. That's why the landowner in Jesus story has a real problem. He has a field full of crops, but he desperately needs labourers to gather it for him, otherwise he will lose it all. So, the landowners needed the labourers.

But the system was set up in such a way as to make sure that it was the labourers who were forced to be dependent on the landowners. Because they had no security, their only hope for survival was to be hired by a landowner. To enhance this dependency, the landowners didn't offer stable employment. They would only hire people on a day-to-day basis. For one day's hard work, a landless labourer would be paid one denarius. The New Revised Standard Version that we read from today translates "one denarius" as "the usual daily wage" because that was the amount of money that was considered adequate for day-to-day survival.

And I have long wondered about why Jesus would tell this parable about a landowner who desperately needed workers to pick his crops before they rotted on the vine but foolishly did not hire enough workers at the beginning of the day to get the job done (presumably because he was cheap and trying to save a few denarii). He was forced to hire more and more workers as the day went on just to get the job done.

I suspect that Jesus thought it was only fair that people be paid enough money to live on – the usual daily wage. Jesus may have recognized that landowner thought that he was being generous by choosing to pay all the workers the full amount at the end of the day, but I can't help but wonder

whether he might have been saying something important about who was really dependent on the generosity of whom.

So I do take out this parable of Jesus from time to time and puzzle over it trying to better understand where Jesus was expecting people to find the kingdom of heaven in it. The more I think about it, the less I think that the landowner is supposed to represent God – he seems, in fact, to be a perfect representation of how the world worked back then and, in many ways, of how it still works today.

Of course, recent events have given me a brand new perspective on this ancient parable. We have been on a wild ride over the last few months in our thinking about workers who do jobs that have traditionally had low wages. At first, it was as if we suddenly realized that these workers, who had always been there and to whom we had given so little thought, were actually essential to our lives and well-being. We began to celebrate them and praise them. And, yes, here in Ontario there were some employers who willingly gave them that extra boost in pay to represent just how important we were all saying they were.

But, five or six months later, I've got to ask, have we really learned anything from this whole experience? It's kind of stunning to see how quickly and how willingly we have gone back to old attitudes. It is discouraging to see any extra pay or benefits so quickly taken back. It is discouraging to hear all of the stories of grocery workers and other frontline workers putting up with abuse and disrespect. And I get that people are tired of this and that their frustration and anger is coming out, but this is just not right.

I honestly do not know exactly where Jesus expected us to find the kingdom of heaven in this story that he told. I do not know exactly where he expects us to find the kingdom of heaven in the events of our own time. But I do know this, his expectation of us is that we never cease to seek for it. Maybe the kingdom of heaven will be discovered when we suddenly wake up, open our eyes and say that this is not right, that the people who own the companies and the stocks need the people who do the labour more than they realize, that all people need to be treated with respect and all sorts of work should be valued.

I think Jesus told that story to make the people in the crowd realize just how twisted the whole system was, how things could be different and maybe should be different and he might have been saying that, when we realize that, that will be when we actually discover the kingdom of God in this parable.