

## Gospel reflections

Matthew 20:1-16

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ “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.’ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These 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.’ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

My preparation for the gospel reflection this week uncovered the work of Peter Rollins. Peter says the following about parables.

*The parable is given to us, but at the same time its full wealth of meaning will never be fully mined. It is not reducible to some clear, singular, scientific formula but rather gives rise to a multitude of commentaries. In opposition to this, many Christian communities view the stories and parables of the Bible as raw material to be translated into a single, understandable meaning rather than experienced as infinitely rich treasures that can speak to us in a plurality of ways. Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God: Marks of the Emerging Church**

This week, (let’s be real... it may be the holidays) I would like to encourage you to spend some time experiencing the ‘*infinitely rich treasures*’ of this parable. I have a couple of different lenses to get you started. What speaks to you from the text?

### Option 1 Context:

Matthew’s placement of this parable is significant. In the preceding story, Peter claimed, “we have left everything and followed you” (19:27). Peter was voicing the ideas of the others and the hope that their dedicated service to Jesus would reap a reward (19:28). Jesus makes it clear that the rewards are not just for the immediate disciples but for **all** who have followed, since “many who are first will be last” (19:30). The parable also plays out in the story that follows (21:17-28): Jesus predicted his death to the disciples for the third and final time. Right after this prediction, the mother of James and John requested special privilege for her sons. They, too, have been with Jesus from the beginning of his mission.

★ Read the parable and ponder what Jesus wants his disciples to know.

### Option 2 Critical reading for our world

Why have so many readers in the history of the church wanted to make this landowner into a God-figure? Why do we so often think that the power figures—whether kings, landowners, or fathers—represent divine authority? Is God really like these? Or are they merely god-like in our mind’s eye? Why do so many of us still want to believe what the powerful people say, even when it flies in the face of reality? The parable teaches us to read our world critically. *Stanley Saunders*

★ Read the parable and don’t assume that God is the landowner. What does the story make you wonder about God and the kingdom of heaven?

## Insights

So, it is fair to ask the question, Are God's ways really like this? Is this kind of maddening equality, regardless of what one has contributed to God's kingdom, really a part of the new reality God is inaugurating in Jesus? For Matthew's Jesus, the answer is 'yes.' God's generosity is an affront to those who think about God's benevolent rule in categories of status, privilege, and what one has earned.

In spite of our Western democratic ideals, we live in systems that are characterized by status differences and privilege that result in valuing some people more than others. But God's ways are much more generous than ours. Just as Matthew highlights that God's kingdom will not result in a stratified system of haves and have nots, so we should live ...in a way that makes clear the surprising equality among the people of God based on God's amazing generosity. Jeannine K. Brown



Literalism was discredited from the beginning of the New Testament through the inclusion of four Gospel accounts of the same Jesus event, which differ in many ways. Which is the "inerrant" one?

The earlier centuries of Christianity were much closer to the trans-rational world of Jesus and his storytelling style of teaching (which does not lend itself to dogmatic or systematic theology). The Gospel says, "He would never speak to them except in parables" (Matthew 13:34). The indirect, metaphorical, symbolic language of a story or parable seems to be Jesus' preferred way of teaching spiritual realities.

Almost all of Jesus' parables begin with the same phrase: "The Reign of God is like. . . ." Jesus fully knows he is speaking in metaphor, simile, story, and symbol. But in recent centuries, many Christians have not granted him that freedom, and thus we miss or avoid many of his major messages. We are much the poorer for it.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, [\*What Do We Do with the Bible?\*](#)

[The power of parables](#) Pete Rollins

[Justice comes in the evening](#) *The Huffington post* [Rachel Held Evans](#) The workers in the vineyard

[The Lord is gracious and compassionate](#) Vineyard worship [God with us](#) Red rocks worship

### Thanksgiving Prayer

(based on Matthew 20: 1-16)

God,  
you are bighearted  
with no limitation.  
You overgive and overpay,  
handing us not only the rewards due us,  
but heaping on us the fortunes of everlasting life and love.

We thank you that heaven is not just like our earth,  
that grace does not abide by our rules  
We are grateful that  
our little ways  
open out  
when we  
listen to you.

Lavish your spirit of kindness upon us.  
Help us give and never  
count the cost.