

MANNA AND MERCY
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newaquist
September 20, 2020
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Matthew 20:1b-15. Jesus Unmasks Economic Injustice

Our Scripture Lesson this week takes a detour from weeks past. Leaping one thousand five hundred years in time from the Exodus of enslaved Hebrews out of the land of Egypt and into a bitter first century life for Jews living under Roman imperial occupation.

The land, meant to hold promise and plenty for all, has instead become a two-tiered society with a wide chasm in between: a ruling class and their conspirators make up about 15 percent of the population and control two thirds of the land's wealth, while a barely subsistent peasant class – 70 - 80 percent of the population – creates the wealth for others.

And then, in a chasm all to themselves, are those who have fallen out of even the peasant class – the “expendables” – because their families cannot sustain them or because their land has been foreclosed by that very ruling class and their conspirators.

These “expendable” migrating day laborers rarely find work. Planting and harvesting happen by season, not year-round. Even then, the labor pool is far larger than the number of jobs available. When migrating day laborers are lucky enough to get work, they can expect a “generous” denarius a day. A non-negotiable wage set by the ruling class. With an argument that this wage is enough to live on. Which it might be, *if* day laborers could find daily work year-round. Instead, they spend a significant portion of the year begging for alms.

Malnutrition, illness, loneliness, and despair form the life of a day laborer in this first century advanced agrarian economy. The life span of day laborers, once they have fallen out of the peasant class, is a mere five years.

Even worse, the priesthood condones it. In *this* land – no longer of promise and plenty for all – the debate raging among the religious elite (who identify with the ruling class) is not over how to help the migrating day laborers but over how best to accommodate the commercial interests of Rome.

And the chasm gets wider ... and wider ... and wider ...

And then ...

The voice of God cries out in the wilderness!

From Galilee, of all places!

The redneck hillbilly sticks of first century Judaism reverberates with these words: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!”

A migrant rabbi gathers a flock of fearless fishermen and calls on the people to proclaim Jubilee! The year of God's favor. The very reign of God, as it is taught in Torah.

The Year of Jubilee, the teaching at the very heart of Torah, looks like this: every fifty years, this central biblical teaching insists, you must cancel all debts, release all enslaved, heal all injured, and redistribute all land.

This Sabbath of Sabbaths, it is also called, this Year of Jubilee at the heart of Torah is God's emphatic insistence that this land of promise and plenty *belongs to God alone*. The land "shall not be sold in perpetuity," says Torah. "You are but aliens and tenants." Including you ruling classes and you, their conspirators.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" the Galileans declare, with Jesus leading the way. Proclaim liberty throughout the land!" in this Year of Jubilee! Change your way of life so that you, too, may live in the reign of God!

This is the point of the Exodus, Jesus reminds the people: God's dream of establishing a just and peaceable community. In a land of promise and plenty for all. In right relationship with God and with one another. With a "welcome table" of manna and mercy, hallelujah!

This is the point of the Exodus, Jesus says. *Not* the so-called kingdom of heaven reflected by the priests of our age.

And then Jesus holds up a mirror, in the parable that is our Scripture lesson today.

It is a parable of Jesus we are taught not to like from the beginning. An allegory of God's grace, we have learned, from so much modern interpretation. Assuming God to be symbolized by the so-called "generous" landowner. And we are the bickering, competing laborers in the vineyard. Who cannot accept God's graciousness toward all.

But Jesus never equates the landowner with God. And neither does the writer of Matthew's Gospel. The story itself, is strictly economic, taking place in a first century advanced agrarian economy where increasingly wealthy landowners extort day labor without fear or consequence. With the backing of religion.

A modern day parallel would look something like this:

In the summer of a global pandemic and an economic meltdown and a national reckoning on systemic racism, business is booming for billionaire Jeff Bezos. He earns thirteen *billion* dollars in just one day! He needs more workers, so he flies his private jet to the southern border to hire undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers for his warehouses.

He offers them a generous minimum wage: \$7.25 an hour. Fifty-eight dollars a day. Far below what any of us would consider a true "living wage," even if they could count on regular work. But they are desperate. So they go.

These new workers (in this modern day parallel of the parable of Jesus) become so busy so quickly they barely notice the lack of windows. The lack of air conditioning. The lack of masks. The workers from all over the world crammed beside them, in the middle of a global pandemic. They just work. And work. And work.

Every three hours (in this modern day parallel of the parable of Jesus) the billionaire goes back to the border, looking for more "lazy" migrants and asylum seekers. The billionaire imagines himself generous when he showers them all with the same \$58. Look at me, giving away my money to these poor lazy migrants!

The billionaire, who (we remember) has increased his billions by thirteen in one day, is *not* generous. He is confusing "Jubilee" with charity. And woefully inadequate charity, at that. And religion is cheering him on. And Jesus holds up a mirror to it all.

Is THIS who you want to be? Jesus demands, of his disciples and of us. Is this who GOD wants you to be? Making a mockery of Jubilee and calling it the kingdom of God?

It is not.

Emphatically.

It. Is. Not!

What, then, should we do, here at SPC, where we have no billionaires, last time I checked, but who are mostly doing okay in this K-shaped recovery? We are worried, for sure. Some of us have lost our jobs, but we have been able to find new ones. Some of us are struggling with our small businesses, but we are at least getting by. All of us are worried, to be sure, but we are not yet homeless and penniless and state-less on the border with the migrants. We are not yet among “the expendables.”

What, then, should *we* do, here at SPC, we who are called to be a “provisional demonstration of the kingdom of God” in our time and place?

There is a word of hope for us in our gospel message this morning. A hope that lies with the manager in the parable. The steward. The one who carries out the orders of the landowner. The one who bridges the chasm between the ruling class and the expendables. If there is any symbolic representation in this first century parable of Jesus, perhaps it is this: the manager as the church. An intermediary of sorts. Whose station in life has more in common with the laborer but whose economic self-interests lean more with the owner.

The manager in this first century story of Jesus is given no voice. The words of the manager are yet to be determined. The manager has a choice, the church has a choice, *we* have a choice as we bridge this widening chasm between those who have plenty and those who have none.

Which side are you on? Jesus wants to know, of the manager, of the church. Which side of this chasm are you on?

If the last eleven months of our ministry at SPC are any indication, we have good news to proclaim! In just one month, we raised over \$7000 for the Pastor Discretionary Fund to support those who are suffering most from the COVID pandemic. Already those funds have gone to good use: within our own congregation, with our mission partners in Nicaragua and the Congo, and with our local Catholic Charities in support of those literal immigrants and asylum seekers along our nation’s southern border.

Just last winter, we raised over \$12,000 for the Alternative Gift Market. *Double* our giving in years past. Rising to the challenge to “proclaim Jubilee” in our own day, in our own small way. Not as an act of charity but as a requirement of biblical economics.

And then this summer, through your distribution of God’s manna and mercy, the SPC Immigrant and Refugee Committee was able to release an asylum seeker from detention and reunite that person with their family. We have literally joined Jesus in “releasing the captives.”

Not only that, I have been amazed through these six months of quarantine that congregational giving has held steady. Yes, those who are hurting have regretfully needed to pull back. We understand, and we love you, and we are here for you. But those who are stable are stepping up to fill the gap. And would you believe, as of this month, SPC has received exactly the amount we have needed to pay our bills. No more. No less.

Truly this is God’s Jubilee in our midst.

There *is* hope in our gospel message this morning, as hard as it is to face the mirror Jesus holds. And that hope is this: we at SPC can honestly say, as we sit at the welcome table, in God's dream of promise and plenty for all, in the trust that God's manna and mercy will come when we need it, where both laborer and landowner – and even the steward – are truly welcome, as equally beautiful beloved children of God, we can honestly say that we are on the side of God's Jubilee!

Amen.

Notes:

1. *This interpretation of Matthew 20:1b-15 relies heavily upon the scholarship of William R. Herzog II in Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.*
2. *See Leviticus 25 for a description of The Jubilee Year*
3. *See www.jubileeusa.org for more information on the work of the interfaith "Jubilee USA Network" to build an economy that serves, protects, and promotes participation of the most vulnerable.*