

Proper 20, Year A
Matthew 20: 1-16
September 21, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Workers in the Vineyard:
The Back Story
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

There is always a back story. We all have them. They're part of the fabric of our lives. And knowing the back story makes all the difference in the world.

Let me start with a back story this morning—the back story to the parable we hear today. It's a story of land and people and people's notions of the land. A story of the land God gave the people. A land they were called to love and care for. A land whose fruits they were to share with those in need. For generations the people farmed the land—not big farms, not chains of vineyards, but small farms worked and owned by peasant farmers. Then the Roman army came. The people on the land found their taxes going up and up and up. After all, Rome had an army to support, roads to build, even aqueducts to maintain. For many the burden of taxes became too high. They lost their land and their livelihood as well. Forced off the land, they struggled to find work—neighbors and friends now jostling with one another for a day of work in the fields. All part of the back story to the parable we hear today. A parable of the powerful and powerless, a story about a landowner and day-laborers, a story set against this backdrop of peasant farmers forced off their land.

One day, a big landowner comes by looking for workers. Kind of strange for a landowner to go to the market place, but no reason for folks to turn him down. The first hired march off to vineyards planted on land they once owned. They work hard, the sun hot, they wonder if they'll make it through the day. Soon more workers join them in the vineyard. It's harvest time. The grapes need to be picked—and picked right away. Again the landowner goes to the market place, again more workers join in the harvest.

Towards the end of the day, the tired workers look up. The landowner is back with yet more workers following at his heels. Not much later, the landowner says to the manager, "Call the workers together. Have them line up. The first up here close to your table. The last at the end of the line. Then pay the last first." The first hired watch as those last hired receive their wages. They hear one say, "A denarius—I got a denarius!" At last, those workers hired at the break of day receive their wages. How mad they are when they look into their hand. "A denarius, just a denarius," they mumble to themselves.

"This isn't fair. This isn't just," the workers say. Then one is pulled aside. The workers hear the landowner say, "Friend..." "Friend," they think to themselves—he doesn't know our name or face—why does he call us friend? How demeaning. How condescending." Then they hear the landowner say, "Take what belongs to you and go." A dismissal if ever they've ever heard one. As the workers turn to go, they hear the landowner say, "Are you envious because I am generous?" "Generous?" they think to themselves, "A denarius generous? It's not even enough to feed a family for a day."

Every time I hear this parable, I find myself thinking about the workers in that vineyard. Something gnaws at me. I find myself wondering, "What was it like for them when they returned to the market place the next day? Did they share a smile, a laugh, and say to one another, 'That was one weird landowner, dude.'" Or did the first hired find themselves bitter and resentful? Did

the workers turn against one another? Did their jostling for place take on an ugly hue? Were seeds of division starting to sprout?

Every time I hear this parable, I find myself wondering just what Jesus was really saying about God and the reign of God. Is the reign of God one that sows seeds of division? Is the reign of God one that pits one group of people against another? Is the reign of God a reign of limited generosity—generosity for only a day? I think not.

There are those who read this parable and would have us believe that the landowner in the parable is a stand-in for God. But I keep returning to that line up and that denarius, and I find myself wondering about a God who sows seeds of division and discord. I find myself questioning a God who practices such limited generosity.

That's not the God I know. That's not the God Jesus knew either. Remember, Jesus was a Jew. He was steeped in the Bible. The God he knew was faithful, generous, giving and forgiving—a God who provided manna in the wilderness and water from a rock. So then I wonder, “What is Jesus up to with this parable?” Could it be that with this parable Jesus is inviting us to step into a different world—a looking-glass world where down is up and unity trumps division; a oneness kind of world; a world where those who sow seeds of discord and division find themselves without an audience—in parable language, cast out into utter darkness; a world of reversals where the least of God's children—the poor, the powerless, and the overlooked—the day laborers if you will—are first; and the first—those with power and position and authority—landowners and their Roman overlords—are last.

This week, as I was working on this sermon, I had a dream. I was seated at a table in the “Oneness Cafe.” The server handed me a menu. I looked it over. They were all “oneness meals”—salads, sandwiches, entrees—each with it's own distinct parts yet making up a coherent whole. I took a minute to look over the menu, to make up my mind. Then I put down the menu and waited for the server to return. He came to me and asked, “What will you have?” I said, “I'll take the oneness salad—pear, prosciutto and arugula.” Then the server asked me a most unusual question. He said, “What is the brokenness you want healed in this meal?” That took me aback. I had to think a moment. I had to remember the pain I'd buried deep—deep in my own back story.

“The kingdom of God is like”—that's the way Jesus invites folks into the looking-glass world of the reign of God. The kingdom of God is like the “Oneness Cafe”—a place where all are welcome, a place where all bring their back stories and their brokenness, a place where all gather at the table, join in the oneness meal, and go out forgiven, healed and renewed. A place where divisions are bridged and where discord is dissipated. Jesus invites us to remember our back stories, to pick up our brokenness and to come to this table—this great oneness table.

As Charles Wesley wrote so long ago,

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast
Let every soul be Jesus's guest;
You need not be one left behind
For God has bidden all humankind.