
“Because no one has hired us”

The story of employment issues of people with disabilities

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“Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?”

⁷ “Because no one has hired us,” they answered.

He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.” (Matt 20:6-7 NIV)

First we must see what is invisible: why I believe this parable is about people with disabilities.

Second: how does this parable relate to today’s employment conditions?

And lastly: What does it show us about living as Christians in the world?

I was first intrigued by this parable because the Jesus Seminar indicated that this was probably an authentic parable of Jesus.¹ This was curious because it appears only in Matthew and not in the other gospels. Reading the answer given by the last ones hired, “Because no one has hired us,” I was stunned. I had heard this exact comment so many times before from disabled people, people who had been looking for work, some for many years, without success. Over the years these had been my words too: “Because no one will hire me.”

The parable in Matthew 20 begins: “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.”

The original audience for this parable, according to Robert Fortna, was mostly “the poor and unemployed, those without hope, the exploited and neglected.”² Of course, those who had jobs didn’t have time to sit around on the hillsides listening to Jesus.

The day laborers in the vineyard lived with scarcity and no security. They were lower on the economic scale than the landowner’s slaves. At least the slaves were provided food and shelter. We see this in the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The landowners had an investment to protect—who can blame them? They took care of their slaves because they didn’t want them to become incapacitated or to die young, thereby “wasting the

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investment.”³ This would lead us to believe that any hazardous work would be assigned to the day laborers, increasing *their* risk of injury.

What do we know about farm labor today? According to William E. Field of *Breaking New Ground*, a research group at Purdue University, “Agricultural production remains one of the most hazardous occupations in the United States. With an estimated 780 work-related fatalities and 140,000 non-fatal work injuries reported by the National Safety Council in 1999, those engaged in agricultural production appear especially vulnerable to injury.”⁴

It was just as hazardous in Jesus’ day. Farm laborers were injured with knives, scratched by animals—wounds that could become infected and quickly become life-threatening, causing death, or disabilities of every kind. Of course, the usual broken bones, left unset, lead to disability as well. The truth is, the longer one works on a farm, the more likely one is to have a disability. The older, more experienced workers, in all likelihood, were disabled.

The day laborers seldom knew if they would have any work today or tomorrow. This was an economic advantage for the landowners in the negotiation of wages. *Just like today.*

At the time of the parable, the landowners had been skirting around the edges of the Talmud Sabbath and Jubilee practices. For example, the practice of hiring day laborers, when the landowner

3. Luise Schottroff. “Human Solidarity and the Goodness of God: The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.” Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann. *God of the lowly: socio-historical interpretations of the Bible*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 133.

4. William E. Field. “Influences of Disabling Conditions on the Nature and Frequency of Farm/ranch-related Injuries,” *Agricultural Safety and Health Network (ASH-NET)*, 1999. The most common sources of these injuries were associated with falls (22%), animals (19%), machinery (12%), and hand tools (8%) [NIOSH 2008].

1. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/jsem.html> 03/15/2022.

2. Robert Tomson Fortna. “Exegesis and proclamation: ‘you have made them equal to us!’ (Matt 20:1-1).” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 1990 no. 72: 66-72: 68.

knew full well that they would be needed all week, meant that the workers wouldn't be paid for the Sabbath because they weren't hired for the "week," only for the day.⁵ The year of Jubilee was to be celebrated every fiftieth year, at which time the land was to revert to its original owner. This redistribution of wealth protected the lower and, what we would call, the middle class. This would prevent the rich from acquiring too much wealth, while helping the small farmers and peasants from falling into indentured servitude. However, at the time of this parable's composition, this practice seems to have vanished and poverty was increasing. *Just like today.*

Luise Schottroff in *Human Solidarity and the Goodness of God*,⁶ explained methods used by landowners to lengthen the harvest time, thereby spreading the workload so that their slaves could do the majority of the work, keeping the need for day laborers to a minimum. For example, planting different varieties of grapes that would ripen at slightly different times created a longer harvest season. This also kept the day laborers scrambling for whatever work was available, jockeying among themselves on the street corner to secure their daily wage. You can see the strong young men pushing forward on the street corner to be the first chosen. A glut of workers for fewer jobs would keep the economic power in the hands of the landowners. *The same as today.*

There they were again, standing by the street corner in front of the Home Depot. A car would pull up and one of them would go over to the open car window. After a minute or so, he'd motion to a couple of the others to join him. They would pile into the car and drive away. This continued all morning. Usually by noon there was no one left, but today was different. Late in the afternoon there were still a few would-be workers waiting, hoping that someone might still need them. What used to be an activity reserved for the undocumented, now, because of the economic conditions, has become an everyday activity for *many* unemployed workers. The abundance of available workers has made it hard to command a living wage and many days there is simply not enough work for everyone. Today's economic conditions are similar to those when the "Laborers in the Vineyard" parable was first told.

According to the Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America 2021, table 5, the employment rate in 2020 for individuals with a disability was 38.4 percent, well below the 75.8 percent for those with no disability. Even with a four-year college education, a person with a disability is less than half as likely to be employed as their non-disabled counterpart.

Disabled people have experience with what it means to wait all day, the next day and the one after that, hoping to be hired. The term "discouraged worker"—those unemployed for so long that they have fallen off the unemployment rolls and no longer believe that they will ever find work—applied to workers with disabilities long before it came into the common lexicon during

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the Great Recession.⁷

For example in 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA⁸) laid off, *yes laid off*, workers with disabilities so their jobs could be given to non-disabled workers who the WPA claimed "needed the jobs more."

During World War II, people with disabilities were fully employed in the U.S. war effort, until the war ended. Then, like Rosie the Riveter, workers with disabilities were sent home. They have never recovered their place in the U.S. labor force.

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Now according to Felix Gryglewicz,⁹ and Luise Schottroff¹⁰ it was not uncommon in ancient times to pay workers a daily wage even if they worked only a partial day. There were no hourly wage agreements or time clocks. That the last workers in this parable were paid a day's wage would not have been a surprise to most

5. Félix Gryglewicz. "Gospel of the overworked workers." in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 19, 1957 no. 2: 190-198: 197.

6. Schottroff, 133.

7. [Bureau of Labor Statistics] (<http://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea05.htm>) Discouraged workers are a subset of individuals marginally attached to the labor force. The marginally attached are those individuals not in the labor force who want and are available for work, and have looked for a job sometime in the prior twelve months. Among the marginally attached, discouraged workers were not currently looking for work specifically because they believed no jobs were available for them or there were none for which they would qualify.

8. [Disability Social History Project] (http://www.disabilityhistory.org/dw_text.html)

9. Gryglewicz, 198. He goes into a very thorough discussion of working conditions, hours, wages, and benefits.

10. Schottroff, 135.

of the workers, many of whom had been the beneficiary at one time or another of this customary way of paying laborers -- it was standard procedure. The common understanding was that the wages included a meal and a day's pay.¹¹ Because a denarius equals 12 pondia,¹² in theory it would have been entirely possible to pay the last ones hired in a few pondia. But this would have been contrary to the usual custom.

David Gowler tells us that the day laborers—all of them—were "members of the 'expendables' class who lived at or below subsistence."¹³ This phrase has a modern ring to it. The 2020 U.S. poverty rate of individuals with disabilities was 25.2 percent; over a quarter of people with disabilities in the United States live in poverty at or below subsistence, while the poverty rate of non-disabled individuals was 11.1 percent—a poverty gap of 14.1 percentage points.¹⁴ Let's not forget that each point represents 363,000 real people with disabilities.

William Herzog estimates that "members of the 'expendables' represented between 5 to 15 percent of the population."¹⁵ This percentage, oddly enough, is also comparable to the U.S. Census 2020 population of people with disabilities currently hovering around 13.4 percent.

The good news is that in the Kingdom of Heaven all those who want to work get jobs, every last one of them. In the end of this parable, it turns out that everyone who worked was paid a living wage. The rub comes when the workers who had been working all day were paid the same as the last ones hired, who had worked only one hour.

¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²"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" (Matt 20:10-12).

This single attribute, disability, gives a different understanding to the complaint: "you have made them equal to us."¹⁶ While much attention has focused on the first hires' complaining about the comparison of the hours worked to the wages paid, it just might be that their real complaint was that they were made equal

11. Schottroff. Note 18 on p 147. "The Edict of Diocletian also assumes that the worker is hired by the day and given board." She goes on to cite various other authors on this subject.

12. Erich H. Kiehl. "Why Jesus spoke in parables." in *Concordia Journal* 16, 1990 no. 3: 245-257 (esp. 254).

13. David B. Gowler. *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 2000), 71.

14. Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America 2021. Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability.

15. William R. Herzog. in footnote 14, Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* 126.

16. Matthew 20:12, New International Version of the Bible, Biblegateway.com.

While much attention has focused on the first hires' complaining about the comparison of the hours worked to the wages paid, it just might be that their real complaint was that they were made equal to "those people," the "last ones hired."

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The first workers were insulted that the landowner "made **them** equal to **us**." I can hear them now, "I am not like **them**! I am better, stronger, smarter, faster, more skilled." And this is true today as well. Who wants to be equated with a disabled person?

The last workers were industrious. Every day they went out to the marketplace looking for work. Today you would call them chronically unemployed. Who wants to hire an older, disabled farmhand when they can hire an able, young worker for the same price?

Carolyn Thompson said that Jesus never gave out handouts. "We have accounts of Jesus interacting with people like this [disabled], but I do not recall any story where he threw them some coins. He asked them what they needed, and in healing some ailment, restored them to a participatory place in their society."¹⁷

This is what happened in the Vineyard story. The landowner is restoring the "last hired" to wholeness, to participate in community. Let's face it, just as today, working confers status. Those whom no one chooses to hire: not only are they poor, and in all likelihood disabled, they are also without worker status and devalued in the community. In Hitler's Germany, people with disabilities were referred to as "useless eaters"—expendables.

When people meet you, one of the first questions is, "What do you do?" If you are unemployed or on government benefits, this is an awkward moment. There is a separation between "them" and "us." The landowner was healing this divide. Like manna in the wilderness, both the meal and the money to buy bread are images of God providing. But the landowner gave the last ones hired more—more than their daily wage. He gave them "worker" status and dignity.

"So when you give to the needy," Jesus said, "do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matt 6:2-3). The last ones hired are "the needy." And Jesus is His right hand. What better way to provide for the poor, than to restore

17. Carolyn R. Thompson, *Any Body, Everybody, Christ's Body—From Creation to Community*, keynote address United Church of Christ LGBT Coalition national gathering, San Diego, California, July 14, 2010.

them to worker status, providing not only bread but dignity.

I believe this is exactly what is happening in this parable. Jesus is using a teachable moment to show us how to apply Matt 6:3.

The first workers worked all day in the hot sun, but they worked with confidence, knowing from very early in the morning that they were going home with a day's pay. All day they worked with the certainty of having their daily needs met. The last hired waited all day in the same hot sun, not knowing whether they would be able to provide for their families or not.

What does this tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven? Everyone's talents are put to use. Everyone gets their needs met. Everyone is honored. God wants everyone invited, even "those people" with whom we would prefer not to be associated. We are to take care of one another; we should rejoice with each other's good fortune and not be envious or jealous. We need to love our neighbor as our selves.

For grumbling about the good fortune of their neighbor, the last ones hired, the landowner expels the first ones hired from the vineyard, "Take your pay and go." This image is not one from your regular workplace. This is the Kingdom of God. Even though the workers have put in long hours, they are no longer welcome back in the vineyard.

The last ones hired went home happy, and why wouldn't they be? You can see them coming home with food for their family, coming home with a smile, happy to be contributing. They had a job, if only for an hour. You can imagine how grateful and relieved they were.

In the "Laborers in the Vineyard" story, we see another glimpse of God's incredible gift of inclusion in community. The landowner could have just thrown a few coins, or a loaf of bread, to these would-be workers who had been waiting all day to be hired. But instead of dispensing charity, the landowner dispenses dignity.

So where is God in all of this? Where's the grace?

God selects using standards that we cannot comprehend. They are not earthly standards or values, yet this does give us a glimpse of how we are to be. "I select you. You are just the worker I am looking for. Go into the vineyard." This "chosenness" is something denied most people with disabilities, both in society and the church.

This story is not about denigrating the first hired, but about raising up the last hired. It provides a model for helping people in need, while restoring them to their rightful place as heirs of the Kingdom. We are to go and do likewise (Luke 10: 37).

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