

A Proper 20 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
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Matthew 20:1-16

Just a couple weeks after celebrating our Labor Day holiday, we encounter a biblical prototype for what we might call 'laborer grievance'

This parable about the laborers' wages comes amid a group of stories in Matthew's Gospel regarding household ethics and practice, including divorce, the role of children, pursuing wealth and slaves

In today's parable, found only in Matthew's Gospel, the landowner conducts multiple cycles of hiring day laborers to work in the vineyard, negotiating a wage with the first group but simply promising just compensation to the subsequent cohorts

In telling the story, Jesus goes out of his way to rub our noses in the story's climax when the steward (not the landowner, who negotiated) calls everyone forward and publicly pays the one-hour laborers the same wage as the all-day laborers

Jesus rebuffs the Human Resource adage that you never share pay stubs among fellow workers

It sets up ranting, resentment, entitlement grouching and laborer grievance!

If we were on retreat and doing Bible study with this passage, I would ask you to decide which cohorts—first or last hired—with which you most identify

Are you the over-achiever that always gets picked in the first round, or are you more of a backbencher who might not be noticed at first?

Are you satisfied with a negotiated wage, or do you start pounding the table when issues of potential unfairness raise their heads?

However we slosh around these wage-and-fairness issues—including our own self worth involving money—Jesus drops a paradoxical climax to the story when he announces, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Wow! What’s he smoking?

Lest we gloss over this proclamation, recall that it’s essentially the same sentence with which he finishes a similar story of the rich man chasing eternal life, the guy who says No to Jesus’s invitation to follow him: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Is Jesus messing with our minds, has he veered off on some utopian riff, is he whacking us with a verbal 2X4 to get our attention?

In both stories of the rich man who says no thanks to Jesus and today’s parable of the day laborers, Jesus speaks explicitly about the kingdom of heaven

Jesus uses this term ‘kingdom of heaven’ in both stories, and it’s a phrase that can get lost in all the shuffle of the rich man’s or the laborers’ dramatic story

Jesus employs this image—the kingdom of heaven—in many other parables—some 51 times altogether in Matthew, Mark and Luke—so it behooves us to get a grip on what he’s saying

What does Jesus mean?

What, when and where do we experience this kingdom of heaven?

If Jesus refers to some postmortem fate, good luck to all of us on passing the entrance exam

If, on the other hand, Jesus points to something like God's breaking into present time and space—right here and now—with a divine agenda that may be very different than the world's agenda, it might deeply impact all the other whacky dynamics that confront us in our larger culture

In last Wednesday's first study group of the autumn season, we discussed at length what 'kingdom of heaven' might mean for us today

We all share 2000 years of biblical imagination and debate regarding Jewish, Hellenistic and other takes on immortality of the soul—what's a soul in the first place—resurrection of the body and what goes where when this earthly journey ends, not to mention when Christ returns again in all his glory

We all have a personal, existential stake in the answer, but we'll also explore a very different take on heaven that speaks to today's parable

Here's the big question: Are we going to heaven (we hope), or is heaven coming to earth?

Like a good Anglican, you can argue for both

But the latter—heaven's breaking into earth right here and now—speaks directly to today's parable

When we serve the world in Christ's name or speak out against injustice, we give witness to the kingdom of heaven that currently is breaking into our time and space

When we strive for justice and peace over dystopia and retribution, we give witness to God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven

What might sound utopian to some—a kingdom of heaven—becomes our moral north star about God's goal for our wellbeing and the just wellbeing of every human being

As we discussed in class, Jesus employs this parable—as he does with all parables—to create paradox and challenge us to think in new ways

Jesus enters our hearts and minds through the back door

By the way, if you are put off by the word 'kingdom' in 'kingdom of heaven' as too feudal for your democratic sensibility, go with the original Greek term which is more fun to say: the *basileia* of heaven

God's *basileia* can also be interpreted as 'reign' or 'commonwealth'

Scripture continuously witnesses to the Good News that God's *basileia* is at hand, if not in hand, as we serve the world and live out our lives

Elsewhere, Paul reminds us that our citizenship (yes, the Greek is *politea*) is in heaven, and heaven remains the zone from which God's presence exudes to surround this world

This may not be Aunt Bea's vision of heaven, but Jesus today and elsewhere beckons us with a new vision of righteousness and justice that breaks into our daily world right here and now, a vision that turns the tables on evil, patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and all the other ills that need to be passing away

As followers of Jesus, we want to be on the *basileia* team that beckons a broken world with justice and reconciliation, which treats the last with the same dignity as the first as witness to heaven, who extends hospitality to strangers and encounters angels unaware

Had I been quicker on the uptake, I would have ordered tee shirts for everyone that said, “I am on the *basileia* team!”

In the Lord’s Prayer when we say, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” remember Paul’s proclamation that our citizenship—our *politeia*—belongs in heaven right here and now

This vision of heaven transcends our private subjective inner feelings to capture a transcendent vision of God’s claiming a righteousness and justice that rolls down like waters

In Jesus, we welcome heaven’s breaking into earth and vanquishing hell—perhaps purchase new red ball caps that say, “To hell with hell!”

Today’s parable reminds us that for Jesus there is nothing timeless or static about heaven, nor does it have to do with some elusive, inner, subjective dream

In the spirit of the Apostles Creed, Jesus is on the move, and he descends into hell to vanquish the power that evil holds over us

By the way, that heavy lift already has been done, it’s history, and it frees us up for acts of creativity and courage

At least 51 times, Jesus proclaims this kingdom as invading the so-called real world to capture our attention and transform the brokenness of human sin

Jesus announces this *basileia* both as a demand and as a promise

So let me ask, how is your life in this tumultuous world giving witness to a gracious God who demands and promises justice, mercy and reconciliation?

Whether in your personal relationships, your engagement with the vulnerable, your politics—*politeia*—or your vision of what holds reality together, how do you understand Jesus' proclamation today that the last will be first?

Whether you feel on top of your world or victimized by it, how might Jesus hold out the promise of radical equality and dignity for our neighbors, not to mention the environment and all of creation?

In a world that feels hellish around its edges, how is heaven breaking into your daily life and our collective lives, how would you know it, and how would you share it with others?