

“Labour Pains”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on September 18th 2011 (14th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 20: 1-16

It occurred to me this past week...it occurred to me that had we been looking...had we been looking for just the right text for the morning after the Fall Fair...
...had we been looking for just the right scripture text for this morning’s service, my hunch is that we would have been hard-pressed to find a more appropriate one than the one our lectionary just happened to toss in our direction.

The very fact...the very fact that oh-so-many of you have been working so very hard (and not just yesterday but in the days and weeks leading up to yesterday!)...
...the very fact that so many of you are likely nursing tired hands, aching limbs, sore backs, will put you in a position in which you will have no choice but to readily identify with this parable....
...will have little choice, **in particular** to identify with the workers in parable.

In short: the very fact that so many Knoxonians have been working so very hard this past while, means that many (if not most of us) are well positioned to recognize just how irritating...just how **irritating**, this parable really and truly turns out to be.

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It’s the irritation factor that I wish to emphasize this morning. A standard, popular view of Jesus’ parables is that they essentially amount to sweet little stories our Lord told in order to highlight what might best be described as home-truths: *spiritual* home-truths. While that may well be true of some of the parables, it’s a perspective that ought to raise at least a few alarm bells, since—in effect—it’s a way of saying that the parables are pretty much telling us what we already know. That’s why this morning’s parable is so useful. As soon as we recognize...

...as soon as we recognize **and acknowledge** that at least some of the parables may have been told with the precise intention of irritating those on the receiving end of the parable, we’re into a whole different way of hearing that parable and—perhaps—all of the other parables. And the simple fact of the matter is this:

There are centuries of labour laws in places such as Canada designed with the precise intent of making absolutely certain that labour practices such as the ones utilized by the owner of the vineyard in Jesus’ parable not be permitted. Furthermore, if the landowner in question—in contemporary Canada—were to attempt to respond to those who objected to said labour practices by reminding them that “hey, it’s my property and I’ll do as I please”...

...am I the only one who hears echoes of Leslie Gore? “It’s my party and I’ll pay what I want to!”...

...surely it’s safe to presume that such an employer would find themselves (at best) blacklisted by every union in town and—at worst—facing some pretty extreme financial penalties courtesy of the Labour Relations Board.

And I realize...I realize that one way of answering that sort of response to the parable, is to make the point that the parable was told way back when: that was then, this is now, and we can’t expect one of Jesus’ parables to reflect modern sensibilities around private property and the fair treatment of labour. Fair enough...fair enough. Nevertheless...

...nevertheless...

...it’s also worth recalling that Jesus, having been reared in the ethos of the Old Testament, might well have viewed private property with an even more suspicious eye than you or I would be inclined to view it. Both in terms of its narrative structure and its legal code, the Old Testament clearly teaches that all land is ultimately God’s (...*the earth is the **Lord’s** and the fullness thereof...*) coupled with the belief that all use of land must never lose sight of the fact that we are but stewards...stewards seeking to serve God’s good purposes in our care of the land. Where does this vineyard owner get-off thinking that he can do as he pleases with resources which are his only in the sense that the Holy One has entrusted those resources to him? Meaning...meaning that our irritation with...our suspicion of this parable...is well founded. But could there be...could there be more to this parable than meets the eye?

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That something more...I hasten to suggest...that something more...resides neatly inside of the phrase with which this—and so many of others of Jesus’ parables begin: *The Kingdom of Heaven is like...the Kingdom of heaven is like...*

...a phrase that carries with it the potent reminder that this parable—this story—is utilizing earthly realities in order to disclose...in order to uncover...in order to hint at (since human language can never do more than provide a hint) of the reality of the things of heaven...the realities of the things of God.

And the point, of course—a point that is true of any of the parables that are told in order to disclose the Kingdom of Heaven—the point is that any such story, any such parable which attempts to compare earthly and heavenly realities, ought to be of interest to us not merely because of the similarities but perhaps especially because of the unavoidable differences between those earthly and those heavenly realities. Lest we forget: it’s precisely the place where the story irritates us, where the story gets under our skin, where something in the story doesn’t “feel quite right” that we need to pay closest attention! And so we need to inquire, as we wrestle with this parable, not only after those places where the kingdom lorded over by our plucky vineyard owner is **similar** to the Kingdom of Heaven, but especially after those place in which those two Kingdoms **differ**. When we make those inquiries...when we ask those pointed questions of this parable, surely one thing clearly emerges.

Consider! Consider what it would mean to be handed (after 8 hours of work) the same precise reward as someone who appeared on the scene 7 hours later! We understand why it would be hard to repress irritation with an employer who compensated in such a random, seemingly wilful way. And our instinct...as those who **do** hunger for justice...our instinct is to hope that those who worked the longer and the harder would reap a proportionally larger reward! That's how things work in this work-a-day world: a world in which...if I get 3/4s of the pie, by definition you will have to settle for the remaining 1/4 of that same pie. But how does that translate...how does that sort of arithmetic translate into the things of heaven, into the very different language of the things of God?

By definition...by definition, surely we can agree that the things of God—much like God's own self—involve us in the infinite: an infinity of light, an infinity of life, an infinity of love. Indeed, if you take the time to read mystical accounts from any tradition—including accounts of that peculiarly modern form of mystical experience known as the near-death experience—in the reading of such accounts, surely it is impossible to fail to notice that what is being attempted (through the frail medium of human language) is to convey an experience of the infinite: an infinity of light and life and love, an infinity of goodness, beauty and truth. But that begs the question:

How do you subdivide that: how do you say that one person will receive two measures of infinity...but the next person will receive but one? You see: it's here, perhaps more than anywhere else, where the parable points beyond itself: points from a world (**this world**) where it still seems to matter to us when Mike gets more than Joe, when Mary Jane gets a bigger thank you than Mary Jean...

...points beyond itself to a world where, lost in “wonder, love, and praise”—lost in wonder, love, and praise—none of that will matter anymore.

*I see a new heaven. I see a new earth...
as the old one **will** pass away,
where the fountain of life flows
and without price goes
to all people...
all people...
who abide in the land.*

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!!

[\[Back\]](#)