



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

***September 18, 2011: Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time***  
***Karen Fitzpatrick***

RCL: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16  
LM: Isaiah 55:6-9; Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18; Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a;  
Matthew 20:1-16a

Since the vineyard traditionally represents Israel and the harvest generally refers to the last judgment, the Matthean parable in today's Gospel is commonly interpreted that way. The "affirmative action employer" then represents God gifting everyone, even latecomers, with eternal life. So those of us who have been faithful for a lifetime would be hard-hearted indeed if we begrudge late-comers the gift of God's kingdom. Yet how human it is to do so. Who has not heard tongues of faithful churchgoers clucking about a "deathbed" conversion after a life of sin?

The parable also defends Jesus' outreach to marginalized people in Jewish society, in the face of complaints about his embracing tax collectors and sinners. Yet isn't this exactly the province of the Church's ministry? Are we not called to embrace those on the margins of society in our time: immigrants; unemployed and underemployed people; those who are homeless, hungry, and destitute; gays and lesbians; unwed mothers; those with handicaps?

Scratching the surface of the Sunday congregation, negative attitudes can emerge toward one or more of the groups just mentioned. How might the preacher lay bare the prejudices that linger in the human heart despite all the human resource and church education programs that try to overcome them? How do we approach these attitudes (recognizing first that they exist in ourselves) and still preach good news? Probably by telling a story. At least that's what Jesus did.

The good news for this Sunday is God's generosity, so prodigious it is hard for us to comprehend, let alone imitate. In the Exodus story God offers quail and manna in quantities beyond what the Israelites can eat. They must learn not to overindulge, to take just enough for one day, to trust God's providence.

Bishop John McRaith of the Catholic diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, illustrates this by pointing out that if we have three loaves of bread, normally we place one on our table, put one in the freezer for tomorrow, and give one to poor people. The challenge, he says, is to give away the second loaf. This takes us beyond generosity; it is trusting God to provide tomorrow's needs.



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Our generosity should extend to the national levels as well. We in the United States like to think of ourselves as benefactors to the world, imagining that we are generous with our foreign aid. But surveys show that most people vastly overestimate how much our nation gives, thinking that about 20 percent of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, when in fact it is less than 1 percent.<sup>i</sup> Most citizens want to help needy countries and people but don't know how little we really do as a nation.

Our concern for justice compels us to look at today's Gospel reading without assuming that the vineyard owner is God. Although Matthew seems to lead us this way, the parable as Jesus may have told it is much richer and more engaging. Parables as Subversive Speech by William R. Herzog II offers a fresh look.<sup>ii</sup> From Herzog we learn that the day laborers of first-century Palestine were an expendable class who found work at planting and harvest time, begging or starving the rest of the year. In the story the owner makes a deal with those first hired (a denarius was an acceptable minimum wage for those in a surplus labor pool, but it was not enough to support a family). Later in the day the owner makes no pretense of setting a wage. Those workers will get what he determines to give them.

At the end of the day, when those who bore the day's heat have to watch others get their wages first, the owner shames them. As they raise a voice of protest, he singles one worker out as a spokesperson and makes a speech that he can do what he wants with his own money. Where is the biblical sense that the land is the Lord's and is given for everybody's use? Far from being a God-figure, the landowner shows the worst elements of an oppressive system. He tosses the spokesperson out of the vineyard. Now we see the workers' complaints in a new light.

What do people earn today working at jobs on the low end of our economic scale? We often hear that only teenagers hold minimum-wage jobs. Yet 40 percent of those earning the minimum wage in this country are heads of households; 68 percent are adults, age 20 and older. Congress has usually failed to raise the federal minimum wage regularly to at least keep up with inflation and lift families out of poverty. Advocates must continue to seek decent wages for working people.

How are hungry people experiencing the Lord's generosity through our nation's policies? How can we speak out on their behalf?



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*Children's Time*

*Written by Larry Hollar*

Bring three loaves of bread. Invite the children to think with you about how our families might decide what to do with those loaves. Eat one today, freeze one for later, and give one away for the church's monthly food offering might be a good approach. But then suggest to them what Bishop McRaith challenges us to do-to trust God so much that we'd consider giving away the second loaf, the one we'd freeze. Remind them of the Scriptures that discuss not worrying about tomorrow and how hard that is for us to do in today's world. Underscore that God certainly wants us to ensure that all are fed-and that's why we pay attention to that second loaf.

*Musical Suggestions*

*Prepared by Larry Hollar*

All Who Hunger-FWS 2126

Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service-UMH 581

Conic, Labor On-NCH 532

All Who Love and Serve Your City-BP 165

Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year A

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<sup>i</sup> Bread for the World Institute, *Foreign Aid to End Hunger: Hunger 2001* (Washington, D.C.: Bread for the World Institute, 2001) 36-37.

<sup>ii</sup> William R. Herzon II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as a Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 79-97.