

## **PART THREE BIBLE STUDY: THE PAIN OF COMPARISON**

### **LEADER GUIDE**

#### **MATTHEW 20:1-16**

#### **Foreword: What does this parable have to do with racism?**

There are at least two answers to this question.

First, as the American colonies were established, the first laborers were White men – colonists and their indentured servants who began to carve out farms and build towns. Before long, enslaved Africans were brought in to tend the crops and construct the cities, including such iconic buildings as the Capitol and the White House. Later, Chinese laborers laid the railroads. In the meantime, White men were making decisions about wealth and power. People of color provided much of what became what became the foundations of this country's prosperity. This nation was built on their labor.

Second, within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, people of color are often considered late arrivals – no matter if they are fourth- or fifth-generation Lutherans! ELCA Lutherans of color are often tacitly expected to allow those who were “here first” to be the most influential in the church—the definers of our theology, the leaders in our congregations, the deciders.

In fact, an argument could be made that people of Northern European heritage within the ELCA often take it as given that this is their church. This attitude, spoken or unspoken, would naturally have an impact on efforts to increase the numbers of people of color within the church. At an institutional level, these efforts currently emphasize forming new ethnic-specific congregations. I suggest that this is the result of how established mostly-White congregations only want people of color who “know their place” to be a part of their congregational lives.

Both of these illustrations are snapshots of what can be pulled from this parable. You are not expected to present them to your participants; they are here simply to show the depth to which this parable can take us.

## **How to use this guide**

Leader's Notes and Leader's Prompts appear throughout the Leader Guide. **Notes**, which appear in **this font**, are to help you facilitate the study smoothly. Prompts, which appear in `this font`, are for you to speak aloud to your group.

Any text in `this font` also appears in the participants' section of the study.

You may make as many copies of the participants' section of this study as you need for your group. Please thoroughly review the participants' section as well as this leader guide. Read both parts through, at least several times, to ensure that it goes smoothly.

## **Preparation**

Please print out as many copies of the participants' section as you have participants. This makes it easier for participants to get into the story and focus on their roles, rather than trying to remember the questions.

Expect and encourage energetic role-playing! The more participants get into their role, the deeper their learning experience will be.

You may also wish to have this story read from more than one translation of the Bible – either for the second time you read the text or, if time allows, as additional readings.

## **Pro tip: Repeated answers**

It can be a challenge to keep people engaged for 15 minutes when participants repeat answers that have already been given. You might suggest that participants may bring down raised hands if someone else provides roughly the same answer they had in the mind.

Or the second person may simply say “piggyback” after someone offers the answer they'd had in mind.

You may use a timer to equitably divide the time available. It is fine to use your discretion and use more time with one question than another. Simply plan ahead – and ask someone to serve as timekeeper.

## **THE BIBLE STUDY**

### **THE PAIN OF COMPARISON**

#### **Introduction**

The parable of the laborers is a familiar one. It has been understood as a story of God's generosity, but as with all good parables, there is more than one way to understand it. We can also see in this parable one of the persistent challenges to God's justice - our habit of comparing among ourselves.

In our exploration of this parable, we are going to give more attention to the experience of the laborers as they make their comparisons among themselves. We will do this by using role play, by keeping to the text, and by using the discussion questions. Both the role play and the questions will help us discover how the experiences of the laborers can mirror our own experiences.

#### ***Hearing the text***

Please hear this story by imagining the people, the places and the action of the story. As you hear the text, listen for words or phrases that have particular energy for you or that speak to you.

#### **Matthew 20:1-16**

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;

and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

**Read the text slowly and thoughtfully. After the first reading ask the large group of participants :**

What words or phrases stood out for you? We are not looking for a deep analysis but a relaxed sharing with this question. What stood out for you?

After brief group sharing, please continue:

It is interesting how where we are on any given day can cause the Word to deliver to us what we most need. That is why the Word of God is evergreen—God meets us where we are. Even when we take on a role, as we are about to do, the Word can bring us a different message.

We will now explore this parable using a little role play. Each of you will take on one of the roles in the parable.

Through the story of the laborers in the vineyard, we will consider the pain of comparison and its effects on our own lives. We will experience how sin and comparisons disrupt the interconnectedness of creation and disconnect us from each other.

### **Assigning roles**

Ask people to count off by fours (or, if necessary, fives). You can determine which is best depending on your total number. Assign the manager only if you have more than 16 participants. As they count off, distribute the participants' sections, which have the scriptural text and the discussion questions they will need.

Assign the roles as follows:

#1 – the laborers who were hired early in the day, 9 o'clock

#2 – laborers hired at noon

#3 – laborers hired at 5 o'clock

#4 – landowner

#5 – manager (only if you have more than 16 people.)

### **A second reading**

Read the text aloud again as narrator, asking people to chime in with their assigned parts in the text. Ask them to see and hear from within their role.

After reading the text, ask participants to gather into groups of 4 or 5 so that each character is represented in each small group. Hand out the pages with the discussion questions. You may read the questions aloud as you hand out the copies.

### **Conversations on the text (15 minutes)**

Ask participants to share within their small groups their feelings and reactions to the questions in the order they appear in the participants' section.

They are to speak in the first person from within their assigned role, for example, "I was so happy when you hired me at noon. I didn't want to go home empty-handed again." Encourage them to interact with one another based on their feelings and experiences within the parable:

Here are the questions that appear in the participants' section:

How do you feel as your character in the story?

How do you feel about the other people in the story?

What do you have to say to each other?

Allow sufficient time for the conversation to develop depth and richness as people get into their roles.

### **Process questions (15 minutes)**

Ask for feelings and responses from each group of assigned characters, asking these questions of all of the Number Ones first, then all of the Number Twos, and so on.

What did you notice as you interacted with each other?

Did you feel unappreciated? Defensive?

Why do you think you responded as you did toward the others?

How did you see yourself in what happened?

How did that make you feel?

Did you make any assumptions about others in the story or were any assumptions made about you? Why do we make assumptions about others? Where do the assumptions of others come from?

Please use the information in the next section as background to guide you in your facilitation of the group's discussion and to summarize the discussion.

## **Background**

There is sometimes an assumption that those who were hired last had not been available earlier that day, or were simply lazy. That is not stated in the text. The laborers hired last had probably been waiting all day to be hired.

In fact, we can see laborers like the ones in this parable yet today. They wait in designated locations, hoping to be hired so their families can eat. The workers in this parable, just like day laborers today, were dependent upon managers to choose them. In other words, the experience of the laborers in this parable is not as far removed from us as we might first think.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard can be used to address three important elements in making progress toward an anti-racist organization:

- The pain of comparison in the household of God or the communion of saints,
- The invitation to participation and valuing of our co-workers, and
- The recognition of the generosity of God.

## ***The pain of comparison in God's church***

Our goal as Christians is to strengthen the community of God so that God's will can



come to this earth. Note, however, that comparison as it is reflected in the parable only serves to tear the community apart.

We regularly compare differences and provide a hierarchy for these differences as if that would lead us to good. Often this kind of comparison places people in opposition to each other, or it is used to show one as greater than others.

There is pain both in being first or best and in being last or worst. Those who are first can be carefully taught not to recognize or even be aware of the weight of being considered first. They can be blind to or deny their privilege.

Those who are last can internalize their placement. They may dream of reaching higher but they also recognize when they are being put in their assigned place.

Rating oneself in comparison with others serves no purpose except to set up oneself or the other for sorrow. Comparison only results in pain.

In the parable, value of the work was not attached to the length of time worked or the agreement between the master and the laborers, but to the workers themselves. When those who were hired first said, "You have made them equal to us," they were talking about themselves, not about the payment.

They were treated justly and paid fairly. Yet they made the mental leap from wages to worth, from pennies to personhood.

A rational and historically sound argument could be made to say that the affirmative action debate was about making "them equal to us." Conversely, arguments could be made that claims of reverse racism are about maintaining or restoring White privilege.

The landowner responds to the aggrieved workers, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? . . . Am I not allowed to do what I

choose with what belongs to me?” No injustice has been done, but the expected privilege has not materialized and the order of the day was disrupted—hence, the protest: “You have made them equal to us.”

The master’s response, “Are you envious because I am generous,” in the original Greek says something more like, “Is your eye evil because I am good.” Comparisons between people challenges the goodness and generosity of God.

### ***That question***

As the landowner hires the workers at five o’clock, he asks, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” He may have seen them during each of his previous visits to the job pool.

They may have been standing there all day wondering, “What’s wrong with me? Why doesn’t anyone want to hire me?” They, too, have been outside in the sun all day – waiting.

Jesus often puts something provocative or unexpected into his parables. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus gave the story tradition a little twist. Customarily, if one character in the story was named, all were named; yet he only named Lazarus. That was provocative to his listeners.

He does the same here with the landowner’s question. Jesus’ audience would have been familiar with how day laborers waited for work. Such a question would have sounded rude and arrogant to Jesus’ first listeners.

“Why am I standing here all day?!” the incredulous response would have been, “I am standing here all day hoping to be able to return home with bread for my family tonight!”

But in the parable they’re more circumspect. When the landowner asks, “Why are you standing here all day?” they simply reply, “Because no one has hired us.” No one has invited them. No one has asked them. No one has recognized their talents and gifts and

welcomed and invited them.

Clearly, Jesus put that surprising question here to foreshadow the later response of the early laborers – those who would consider themselves to be first. In today's language, Jesus just puts that idea out there.

### ***The point of a generous God***

Recognizing God's generosity and our place as receivers of God's grace is as humbling to us now as it has ever been. The unredeemed ego wants honor and praise for what it has accomplished; it has difficulty acknowledging God's grace or the opportunities and access that have made any personal success possible.

This parable is certainly countercultural as it challenges the notion that we earn what we get and replaces it with the idea that we have what we have because God is generous.

So, then, whose is the merit? It is God's.

Whose is the praise? It is God's.

Who is the sower of the seed and who is the one who gives the increase? All glory goes to God.

### **Conclusion**

The workers in the text all responded when their time came, however, each was paid the same at the end of the day.

What time do you think it is for us in our nation today? What time is it in this church?

Paragraph to reproduce as handout (either one copy to group or one per person)

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Please share your feelings and reactions to these questions one-at-a-time and in the order they appear on this paper. Share your reactions with each other by speaking in the first person from within your assigned role. You are invited to interact with one another based on your feelings and your experiences within the parable.

The questions:

How do you feel as your character in the story?

How do you feel about the other people in the story?

What do you have to say to each other?