

# The Parable of the Next Day in the Vineyard

Hespeler, September 24, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 1:21-30, [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

**Y**ou know that there had to be at least one in the crowd. I'm not saying that this person was a wealthy landowner themselves. For the most part, it seems as if the people that Jesus attracted and who filled his crowds tended to be on the lower end of the economic scale.

They were the ones who loved it when he said things like, "**Blessed are you who are poor.**" (Luke 6:20) But even in such a crowd, there are always some who are extraordinarily sympathetic to the concerns of the landowners and the wealthy, sometimes so much that they can forget the needs of other people who struggle like them.

## A Conversation

And so, I suspect that this person, whoever they were, struck up a conversation with somebody else as they left the crowd following this particular parable. "You know," they said, "that is all well and good. In that parable of Jesus, at the end of the day, all of the people who had worked in the vineyard went home with one denarius in their purses.

"And I know that one denarius is not really a huge amount of money, but the thing is that it is enough. It is enough for one person to get by for the day – to put some food in their belly and perhaps have a decent place to sleep for the night.

"I want them to have that as much as anybody else. Lord knows that I appreciate it when I have a denarius in my purse at the end of the day! But there is just one problem with how Jesus told that story. He said it took place in the kingdom of heaven. But I'm wondering if that foolish landowner still found himself living in the kingdom of heaven the next day."

## An Alternate Parable

With that, the critic cleared his throat and began to do a passable imitation of Jesus' manner of speaking when telling parables.

"Ahem, for the kingdom of earth is like a landowner who was a very successful vintner. He had done so well selling his wines that he had been able to purchase many vineyards. And so, after one very successful day of paying unskilled transient workers to gather his grapes, he was hardly done! The next day there was another vineyard that was just perfectly ripe and ready to harvest.

## Looking for Workers

"And so, he went out early the next morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. He went directly to the place in the market where it was customary for those who were looking for work to gather. And, much to his surprise, he saw that not one single person was there.

"He didn't think much of it at first. He just assumed that, maybe after they had all been paid a full denarius the previous day, they had eaten too well and then slept better in a decent bed. Maybe they had just slept in a bit. He decided to come back a little bit later.



“When he returned at nine a.m., however, there was still no one to be found. Much to his consternation, he also found the same thing at noon and then at two p.m. The landowner began to worry. The very thought of all of his beautiful grapes at the peak of ripeness hanging from the vines in the heat of the day disturbed him. Surely many of them would be at risk of spoiling and being useless to him!

## Everyone Finally Shows Up

“Finally, he returned to the marketplace one last time at five o’clock. And what do you think? There were so many workers there looking for a job that he suspected that they had come from many of the surrounding towns as well.

“And what could the landowner do? He had no choice but to hire them all for a denarius and send them out into his vineyard. But it was too late, and the sun soon set. Despite there being so many workers, they had barely managed to gather even a quarter of the grapes and the rest were lost.

“And the landowner grumbled against the workers saying, ‘Verily it is true that nobody wants to work anymore!’”

## There is Another Parable

I would suggest to you that, if you want to appreciate Jesus’ original Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, you need to understand that there is also another parable – what I like to call the Parable of the Next Day in the Vineyard, that we need to listen to.

And make no mistake that the Parable of the Next Day in the Vineyard is a story that is being told. It is being told constantly in our media, in our thinktanks and on just about every level of our society. In fact, the story is so pervasive that we just assume that it is not a story at all, that it is just a statement of how things are.

## The Stories we “Know”

I mean, you hear that story, and you say, “Well, of course, that is exactly how it would turn out. If you actually decided to pay everyone in society the same amount – basically enough money to live on – and you made it clear that you would pay them the same no matter how much or how little they worked, we all agree that the inevitable result of that would be that everyone would work as little as possible.”

We also know that other similar stories that we tell are true in the same way. We all “*know*” that if you give people who are unhoused a large amount of money, they will just spend it all on drugs and alcohol. We “*know*” that if you let office workers do their jobs from home that they will definitely slack off work. And we also have various stories that we tell about minority groups – stories that I won’t repeat here because they contain some very damaging ideas – but they are also stories that we think of as true in much the same way.

## They are Stories

But, despite all of this, we need to understand that these are stories – not established facts. And, yes, they are stories that sound true and plausible. They have a certain logic to them that we can follow. They especially make sense to us because they fit with the worldview that we have already accepted. But all of this doesn’t necessarily make them true.

## The Basic Income Pilot

In 2017, as you may recall, the Liberal Government of Ontario set up a Basic Income Pilot Project. The idea behind this project was to give individuals \$13,000 a year and couples \$19,000 over three years in order to see what happened.

It was not an enormous amount of money. It was sort of like a denarius a day in Jesus' world – enough to cover the basics, but little more. But participants in this study would receive that amount whether they worked or not and no matter how much they worked (at least with only a small amount being clawed back from their earnings).

In many ways, that pilot project would have been a way of figuring out whether Jesus' Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard or my Parable of the Next Day in the Vineyard was a better reflection of reality. We could have found out what really happens when you pay people enough to live on no matter how much they work. We could have found out whether it was reality or just a story.

## The Cancellation

But, as you probably also heard, we did not get to find out. The government changed and the new government (despite having promised otherwise) cancelled the pilot after it had only run a few months. The government explained it by saying, that “instead of putting money into the experiment, which cost an estimated \$115 million over three years, it would “focus resources on more proven approaches.”

## Proven Approaches?

And, I don't know about you, but that sure sounded like good news to me. What, you mean to tell me that there are proven approaches that can be applied in order to lessen the problem of poverty in our society and the government knows what those approaches are?

If that is the case, though, then how is it that over recent decades the problems of poverty and income disparity have only gotten worse in our society? If we have proven approaches, either we aren't using them or they aren't working, so that hardly makes it seem as if they are proven!

But there is, of course, another possibility. Is it possible that the pilot was cancelled because people have already decided that they know what is true – that The Parable of the Next Day in the Vineyard isn't just a story, but the truth?

## Homelessness Study

There is another study that was recently completed by the University of British Columbia that involved giving homeless people a lump sum of \$7,500. Now this study is not absolutely conclusive. Some people have raised some questions about how the participants were chosen. But the overall conclusions at the very least certainly called into question the story that our society had generally accepted about the housing crisis.

The people who received the money did not act according to our society's dominant story. They did not waste the money on drugs or alcohol. They used it to do sensible things like pay off debts and secure housing and put themselves in better positions to get jobs.

## Are our Stories Fairy Tales?

All of this makes me wonder whether the dominant stories that we tell about poverty and the housing crisis, about addiction and “nobody wants to work anymore” are just fairy tales that we tell to make sure

that nothing really changes in the way we have organized society and to make us feel okay about that. Most of all, it suggests to me that we just don't want to know that those stories may not be entirely true. We'd rather just keep believing our comfortable stories.

## The Genius of Jesus

And this where I want to bring us back to the amazing genius of the man we call our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. When he came along preaching about something he called "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven," he actually was questioning everything about how his society was organized. The kingdom of God was not merely about how things would be someday in heaven, it was about how things could be radically different here on earth right now.

But his greatest genius was in how he chose to present such a radical message. He knew that it wouldn't work just to say radical things like, "We shouldn't just organize our entire society around the needs of the wealthy landowners who want to make profits from their vineyards." Or "We should make sure, no matter what, the people have enough to live on." People would have just laughed and dismissed him as a dangerous radical.

## The Power of Stories

That is exactly why Jesus told stories instead. Stories have this incredible power; they can help us to imagine how the world could be different.

And, yes, it is true that no story can answer all of the problems that come with imagining a different world. Yes, it is probably true that you couldn't build a functioning economy just by paying every worker a denarius a day no matter how much work they did. You would probably have to build some incentives into the system.

But, at the same time, by telling a story of how things could be different, of how things could look completely different when you saw them from the point of view of the workers in the field instead of the wealthy landowner, the story that Jesus told called into question the way that things had always been seen.

## Challenging our Stories

I certainly recognize that the economic issues around poverty and the housing crisis that we face in our society today are complex. There are no quick fixes. But I also believe that these are problems that cannot truly be addressed until we challenge some of the stories that we tell around wealth and poverty in our society. Jesus did that by telling an alternate story.

He invited us to dream of a different way of doing things, something that he called the kingdom of God. And he did all of that just by telling a few stories.

I think that that leaves a challenge for us. There are absolutely dominant narratives in our society that need to be challenged. It sort of looks like they won't be challenged by doing things like running pilots on basic universal income or studies that include just giving homeless people some money. Those studies actually seem really promising, but I'm afraid it won't happen because people are afraid to challenge the dominant narrative.

So, what are we left with? We need to be telling a different story, the story of the world as it could be. We are left with the challenge of doing what Jesus would do.