
PODCAST START:

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy.

FS: It's time for another week of the queer lectionary podcast! This week we're taking a look at the text for September 24th [2017]. We're going to look at Matthew 20:1-16. It's a little bit long, but I think it's important, so I'm going to go ahead and read it for us. It's from the Common English Bible.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

“Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

“‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they

would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 'These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.'

"But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?' So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last."
[CEB]

B: Oh man. I have so many different thoughts, I don't even know where to start. [laughs] Since this month is all about getting back to the basics, I think where I want to start is with how I first understood this passage. How it was basically first presented to me was that, "It doesn't matter if you say a prayer and accept Jesus to be your Lord and savior when you're young or old or at the end of your life; just as long as you say that prayer before you die, we all get to go into heaven." [laughs] And that was the beginning and the end of the meaning of this passage. I think that, as we talked about last week, that interpretation just does scripture such an injustice. There's so much more going on here than that, and so set that off to the side. I just can't help but think, this is one of many places throughout both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures that economics comes into play when we're talking God's vision for the world. Economics and justice and God's will and righteousness all seem inextricably interwoven. I think about folks who will say things like, "I'm fiscally conservative and socially liberal," and I think, well, you can't un hinge those two things. Taking care of people necessarily involves taking care of their finances. I think there's some element of economic justice going on here, that a denarion is sort of a typical day's wage. It's not just a flat amount of money. There's something in this passage to be saying that the Kingdom of God is paying people a living wage, regardless of how much they can or cannot work. People deserve to have their needs met.

FS: I love that you bring out the economics of this passage, because I think that that's really important and vital. And to me, one of the things that I was always taught, like you, that this was a kind of a salvation message passage and that we

shouldn't be bitter about people who got saved right at the end because God was really generous – the idea was that this was a story about God as the vineyard owner, that's the metaphor. And I think for me, if you continue on with that metaphor of looking at God as the vineyard owner, this does say something about the generosity of God. The workers, they weren't looking for God's generosity. They just happened to be on the receiving end of it, which I think is really beautiful, especially in a world where so often, especially evangelical Christians spend a lot of time talking about who's in and who's out. And we don't get a sense of God as generous, we get a sense of God as kind of a vindictive bully who has a checklist of who has earned their way into God's good graces. Which is really ironic, right, because they're also a group of people who thinks that all you have to do to be saved is to say the right prayer. So it's ironic that they would have this checklist.

B: It's a weird, sort of, you earn it but you don't. [laughs] You still have to do something quote-unquote correctly.

FS: Right. Right. So, there's a lot there. But I think too, though, you're right. This is saying that not only is God generous but the generosity of God extends out – it's beyond salvation, it's also about economic wellbeing, it's about being a part of something that matters. I think that when the landowner goes back and finds the people who are just standing around doing nothing and says to them, "Why are you just standing here?" Their response is really telling. They're like, "Because no one hired us." And I think that they really wanted to work, they wanted to be a part of doing something. And we can talk about how there's something there, too. That our worth is not tied up in our labor. But I think that the generosity of the landowner, to give them something to be a part of, is also really beautiful. And to give them back their sense of meaning and worth and connect them to a larger community. So there's a lot of really beautiful things in this passage.

B: There's this sentiment in some corners of Christianity that salvation is scarce and that it's only for some and not for others, and that it has value because it's for us and not for them, or it matters because we have to do something or give up something in order to get it. It becomes transactional. That's just not what we see here. We see in this passage that there's an abundance here. There are certainly parts of scripture where we see images of God dividing the wheat from the chaff and dividing the flock, and God certainly does have harsh words for some people in some parts of the Bible. But here we see, in this image of the kingdom of heaven, the landowner goes back multiple times and sort of swoops everyone up into his generosity. I think that that's a Biblical view of God as well.

God wants to be generous with everyone and include everyone in that vision of the kingdom of heaven.

FS: Yeah, and I think to go back to your point about these passages where we see God dividing, it's also really important that God is dividing people not based on belief but on behavior. And it's not just behavior, like, people drank and smoked and said bad words, it's like their behavior of how they treated the most marginalized and the most at risk. I think that that, too, is something that's often left out in our conversations about scripture. I think that that's what we're trying to do with this back to basics month, right, is to really talk about – part of what it means to be clear in your Christian faith is to understand things like historical context, to understand things like the overall arc of scripture towards justice. These are really vital things and they inform our faith in powerful ways. We need to be talking about them, and we need to be drawing out those themes. If that's something that you're interested in doing more of, we would love to have you continue this conversation with us in Sanctuary Collective, which is our online community. We've been having conversations throughout this month and we will continue to have them both in Sanctuary Collective and on the podcast. If you're interested in Sanctuary Collective, you can join at QueerTheology.com/sanctuarycollective.

B: And, if you're listening to this on the day that it comes out, or shortly thereafter, you have a few more days to get in on our get-back-to-basics webinar. That's going to be on Thursday, September 21st [at 8 pm]. You can register for that at QueerTheology.com/basics. We'll put all the details for that in the show notes as well. Until next time!

[outro music plays]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker

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