

The Laborers of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16): A Hispanic Homiletical Reading

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Introduction

Hispanics in the United States are developing a particular way of doing theology. The fledgling Hispanic theological movement is a contextual or political theology that takes as its point of departure the reality that the Latino community experiences daily in this nation. Hispanic theology¹ is rooted, thus, in the Latino community. It is the pastoral expression of a constant struggle to achieve liberation and self-determination. This communal emphasis makes it truly bilingual, multicultural, multiracial, inclusive, and ecumenical. “Bilingual” because in order to function in the United States most Hispanics employ constantly both English and Spanish, shifting from one to the other as necessary. “Multicultural” because Hispanics in the United States have different national backgrounds. While close to two-thirds are of Mexican descent, there are significant groups from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central America, and South America (some may even count as “Hispanics” people from Brazil, Portugal, and Spain). “Multiracial” because from the time of the conquest there has been a constant miscegenation of people from different ethnic backgrounds in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a rule, people from the Caribbean and Brazil have some African heritage while Mexicans, Central Americans, and people from the Andean regions have some Amerindian ascendancy. “Inclusive” because Latino and Latina theologians work together in the development of this theological movement. And “ecumenical” because Hispanic theology is a collaborative effort where Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Pentecostal theologians do “teología de conjunto” (collegial theology).

One of the cornerstones of Hispanic theology is its approach to biblical hermeneutics.² Given that the Bible occupies a central place in the Latino religious community, Hispanic theology has developed a distinct methodology for reading scripture. As I have argued elsewhere,³ the Hispanic “hermeneutical circle” moves as follows:

1. It takes as its point of departure the social location of the Hispanic people in the United States, using marginalization as an entry point to the theological process.
2. It approaches scripture as a liberating text, questioning the traditional individualistic interpretations.
3. It establishes a correlation between the social relations that shaped the biblical text and the social relations that shape Hispanic experience.
4. It employs a key metaphor to communicate the implications of the aforementioned correlation. Such metaphor summarizes, embodies, and advances the findings, thus functioning as the hermeneutical key for the whole process.

Let us now use the Hispanic hermeneutical circle to interpret the Parable of the Laborers of the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16).

Reading the Parable

As stated above, Hispanic hermeneutics departs from the social location of the Hispanic people in the United States. Therefore, it reads the text from the perspective of the “desempleados,” the unemployed Latinos who stand at intersections of busy streets, waiting for somebody to pass by and offer them twenty dollars in exchange for doing house or yard chores. It reads the text from the perspective of the “niñeras” and the “sirvientas,” Latinas who provide child care and housekeeping for the affluent. It reads the text from the perspective of the “braceros,” the migrant agricultural workers who travel from state to state, picking crops. It reads the text from the perspective of the “costureras,” Latinas who work all day sewing, sometimes at home and sometimes in a factory. It reads the text from the perspective of the “obreros,” the workers who provide cheap labor in construction and custodial jobs. In short, it approaches this particular text knowing that there are hundreds of thousands of Hispanics working in seasonal jobs; Latinos and Latinas who work today not knowing if they will have a paycheck tomorrow.

After determining the social location of the Hispanic community, our methodology leads us to a critical reading of the traditional interpretations of the text. Such critical assessment is fueled by two assumptions. The first is the positive assumption that the Bible is a liberating text; that one of its central topics is the affirmation of the full humanity of the “excluded.” It is the proclamation of the God of life who hears the cry of the poor, the marginalized, and those who are rejected because of their gender or their racial-ethnic background. The second is the negative assumption that traditional readings usually disregard or distort important aspects of the biblical message for ideological reasons. Such readings, responding to the values of the powerful, tend to privatize and psychologize the text. The end result is a reading that postpones the ethical implications of the gospel for the other world.

Our suspicions are sadly confirmed when we sample a few commentaries on this parable.

Some commentators omit the parable or dismiss it with a single line.⁴

Others affirm that the parable refers to the interecclessial struggle between Christians from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.⁵ The parable would be, thus, an allegory that explains why non-Jewish believers should be accepted as part of the new people of God.

A different take on this theory affirms that the parable refers to an interecclessial power struggle between leaders from different generations.⁶

Still others see the parable’s reference to the “evil eye”—the quasi-magical power of envy—as its hermeneutical key.⁷

Even those who see the parable as an affirmation of God’s grace in face of those who object to the acceptance of others as equals shy away from affirming the socio-political implications of the text.⁸

Some commentators even dare to blame the laborers for their misfortunes. Joachim Jeremias’s remarks border on the offensive:

Even if, in the case of the last labourers (sic) to be hired, it is their own fault that, in a time when the vineyard needs workers, they sit about in the marketplace gossiping till late afternoon; even if their excuse that no one has hired them (v. 7) is an idle evasion (like that of the servant in Matt. 25.24),

a cover for their typical oriental indifference, yet they touch the owner's heart.⁹

Besides, Eduard Schweizer states that "it is evident they were not yet at the marketplace at the sixth or the ninth hour. It is simply left open whether their coming late to find work is their own fault."¹⁰ These commentators ignore that seasonal workers usually have to attend several "work calls" during the day. They go from job site to job site until they are hired. They may even go to a new job site after completing an assignment. In short, these sad remarks advance one of the main tenets of the ideology of the powerful: the idea that the poor are lazy.

However, a sample of commentaries written by Hispanic theologians yields a different result. First, Justo L. González—in a commentary intended for Hispanic congregations—acknowledges that the parable contradicts our contemporary labor practices, given that in our culture most people are paid by the hour.¹¹ He states that this apparent injustice is in reality a "higher" justice: the justice of God. Those who were hired late in the evening were not lazy, they just could not find employment for the day. In hiring them at such a late hour, the owner of the vineyard shows "interhuman" justice and mercy. "Interhuman" because it is directed to other human beings, contrary to the traditional understanding of a "righteousness" directed to God mainly in cultic settings. The workers who came in late will now have enough money to buy food for their families. This example of interhuman justice and mercy serves two functions. It reflects God's justice, mercy and grace toward humanity, and it calls the church to follow God's example, practicing justice and mercy in its daily life.

Second, José D. Rodríguez interprets the parable as an exposition of God's grace.¹² Rodríguez, a Lutheran scholar, even ties the theological message of this parable with the doctrine of justification by faith through grace. However, his theological emphasis goes hand in hand with a sociopolitical reading that recognizes the ethical demands of the text. His understanding of justification by faith is comprehensive enough to include interhuman justice. That is why he calls this text "The Parable of the Affirmative Action Employer."

In my opinion, this is the parable of the Affirmative Action Employer. When I first thought about giving a different title to this story, the first thing that occurred to me was to name it the parable of the Equal Opportunity Employer. After a careful study of its content, however, I concluded that this would be a mistake. The parable does not provide us with a description of someone who is willing to give equal opportunity to people provided they show the same number of credentials, the same curriculum vitae, or the same experience. The story describes an employer whose criteria go beyond merit to focus on need.¹³

Hispanic scholars, interpreting the parable from the perspective of the Latino people, offer a new reading of the text. This reading takes into consideration the ethical claims of the text, understanding that true sanctification demands interhuman justice. It also reinterprets grace in a sociopolitical key, seeing the current emphasis on performance, success, and merits as an ideological manifestation of "salvation by works."

The third step in our hermeneutical process is to establish a correlation between the social location of the text and the social location of the Hispanic community. Most Jewish people in the first century were peasants.¹⁴ A good portion of the agricultural

land was owned by absentee landlords. Such farmland was cultivated by laborers just as the ones depicted in the parable. Their economic reality was characterized by poverty, subemployment, heavy taxation, and dispossession. Given that they were also living under Roman colonial rule, their sociopolitical reality was characterized by oppression, political marginalization, racism, ethnic miscegenation, and discrimination.

The reality of the Hispanic community in the United States has many points of contact with the reality of the first-century Jews. These have been expounded at length by Virgilio Elizondo and Orlando E. Costas in their writings.¹⁵ It will suffice to say now that Hispanics also have to endure poverty, struggle to find jobs, combat racism, and overcome discrimination. This hard reality promises to become even harder under the current political climate of the country. The government has adopted a “neoliberal” view of capitalism, abandoning the Keynesian perspective. Here I use “neoliberalism” in its financial sense, as a return to the economic theory that emphasizes individual freedom from government regulations, based on free competition and the self-regulating market. Neoliberals want to dismantle the safety net provided by the “welfare state.”¹⁶ Their ideological emphasis on merit and success disregards the fact that the poor do not have the same opportunities as the affluent in the United States. Furthermore, most neoliberal economists recognize that this brand of capitalism entails a “social cost,” given that the economy cannot provide full employment. This “social cost” is nothing but an euphemism for the suffering of the poor.

Therefore, from a theological perspective, there is still another point of contact between the social location of the text and the social location of the Hispanic community: the rule of idolatrous political systems.¹⁷ The Jewish people lived under the rule of the Roman Empire, a kingdom that worshipped the Emperor as a personification of the state. Hispanics live under the rule of neoliberal capitalism, which sees the poverty of a percentage of the population as a necessary social cost of financial success. In order to continue their rule, both systems are willing to sacrifice human lives.

The final step in the Latino hermeneutical circle is to employ a metaphor that would summarize, embody, and advance the exegetical and theological findings, functioning thus as the hermeneutical key for the whole process. Different Hispanic theologians employ different metaphors. By far, the most common is “mestizaje,” the Spanish word for the miscegenation between people from different racial-ethnic groups.¹⁸ In the case of Mexican-Americans, such “mestizaje” occurred twice: first between Spaniards and Native Americans and, second, between Mexicans and “Americans.” In this case, however, I will use the concept of “poverty” as the metaphor or paradigm to interpret the parable.

After all this process, we may summarize our findings as follows: The main topic of the parable of the laborers of the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) is God’s attitude toward the poor. The divine attitude would be depicted by the landowner’s merciful treatment of the laborers (v. 10). That attitude is characterized by two theological virtues: justice and mercy. In the same way in which the landowner promises the latecomers to “pay whatever is right” (v. 4), God’s justice also promises to provide us what is just. The landowner fulfills that promise when he pays all the workers “the usual daily wage” (v. 2), knowing that they needed at least that amount to take care of their families. The understandable complaint of the laborers who toiled all day long exemplifies the

attitude of those who judge according to the prevalent social values (vv. 9-15). However, the landowner's gesture would be an example of a justice that expresses the values of God's reign (gr. "basileia"), a superior justice that exceeds the righteousness "of the scribes and the Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20). Such justice, which goes beyond legal regulations and human merit, is the brand of justice practiced by a community of faith that has learned the meaning of the phrase "I desire mercy not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13 and 12:7). This superior justice goes beyond cultic regulations, demanding the practice of interhuman justice. The parable would depict, thus, how God loves, cares for, and saves people who admittedly do not deserve such divine mercy. In brief, the parable of the Laborers of the Vineyard is a clear expression of the "scandal of the gospel": God affirms the full humanity of the "excluded."

Conclusion

A contextualized reading of a text demands a contextualized sermon. Therefore, when I imagine a sermon about this parable, the intended audience that comes to my mind is the congregation that has been my home church for the last five years: "El Aposento Alto" Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Forest Park, GA. This local church, which started out as a small Christian fellowship group some ten years ago, received its church building as a gift from an Anglo-European Disciples congregation that decided to dissolve itself. That congregation dwindled to just six members after the community became mostly African-American and Hispanic.

Preaching the parable of the Laborers of the Vineyard at the Aposento Alto is not easy. There is Brother Jaime, who was left for dead in the desert by his "coyote" the first time he tried to cross the border. It took him a week to reach town, only to be deported by the "migra." There is Brother Agustín, a construction worker. On several occasions he has worked for weeks at construction sites, only to have his bosses avoid paying him by calling the Immigration and Naturalization Service. There is Sister Ileana, whose job at the airport did not allow her to attend Sunday services for a year and a half. There is Sister Carmen, a mother of two who works the graveyard shift at Walmart. And there is Brother William, our pastor's husband, who is of an age where he should be retired, but on Sundays puts on his uniform after the Lord's Supper and runs to the Braves' Turner Field Stadium where he works for the guest services division. It is not easy to preach this parable at the Aposento Alto because its members are the contemporary "obreros" of the vineyard. Their social location is so close to the social location of the text that they have a natural connection to the biblical story.

The main topic of the sermon would be God's love for the poor.¹⁹ The sermon would stress God's love for all Hispanics—particularly for those who can be seen in cities like Austin and Los Angeles waiting by the street to be hired. It would also describe the clash between the values of human sociopolitical systems and the values of God's reign. Such a sermon would be a hopeful proclamation of the gospel: God's merciful acceptance of the excluded and the poor. A sermon like this may be titled "The Survival of the Weakest."

Notes

¹ For an introduction to Hispanic theological thought see Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology in Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

² For a brief introduction to Hispanic hermeneutics see Fernando Segovia, "Reading the Bible as

Hispanic Americans" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol 1, ed Leander Keck et al (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1994), 167-173 For a critical assessment see Segovia, "Hispanic American Theology and the Bible Effective Weapon and Faithful Ally" in *We are a People! Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed Roberto S Goizueta (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1992) 21-49 For a comprehensive introduction see Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia The Bible Though Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1995)

³ Pablo A. Jiménez, "In Search of a Hispanic Model of Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Latino/Hispanic Theology* 3 2 (November 1995) 44-64, "The Bible A Hispanic Perspective" in *Teología en Conjunto A Collaborative Protestant Theology*, ed José D. Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell Otero (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 66-79

⁴ Jack Dean Kingsbury does not comment the parable in *Matthew*, Proclamation Commentaries, 2d ed (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1986), and he only dedicates a line to it in *Matthew as Story*, 2d ed (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1988), 80

⁵ Pierre Bonnard, *Evangelio segun San Mateo* (Madrid Ediciones Cristiandad, 1976), 435, Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London SCM Press, 1954), 23-28

⁶ John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel* (New York, Crossroad, 1991), 141

⁷ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta John Knox Press, 1975), 393 See also John H. Elliot, "Matthew 20 1-15 A Parable of Invidious Comparison and Evil Eye Accusation," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 22 2 (Summer 1992) 52-61

⁸ M. Eugene Borring, "The Gospel of Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol 8, ed Leander Keck et al (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1995), 392-394

⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London SCM Press, 1954), 26

¹⁰ Schweizer, "The Good News According to Matthew," 392

¹¹ Justo L. González, *Tres meses en la escuela de Mateo* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1996), 118-119

¹² José D. Rodríguez, "The Parable of the Affirmative-Action Employer," *Apuntes* 8 3 (Fall 1988) 51-59

¹³ Ibid , 56

¹⁴ Here we are following Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1987)

¹⁵ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll, New York Orbis, 1983), Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, Michigan Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989)

¹⁶ For a theological critique of neoliberal capitalism see Cristianisme y Justicia, *El neoliberalismo en cuestión* (Santander Editorial Sal Terrae, 1993)

¹⁷ For a critique of the idolatrous nature of capitalism, see Franz Hinkelamert, *Las armas ideológicas de la muerte*, Segunda Edición (San José Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones, 1981)

¹⁸ For a brief introduction to Elizondo's concept of "mestizaje" see "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection" in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed Allan Figueroa-Deck (Maryknoll, New York Orbis, 1992), 104-123, see also Elizondo's rather biographical book *The Future is Mestizo Life Where Cultures Meet* (New York, Crossroad, 1992)

¹⁹ *Contra* Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 27 "Why did Jesus tell the parable? Was it his object to extol God's mercy to the poor? If that were so he might have omitted the second part of the parable (v 11 ff.)"