



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

**THE SEVENTEENTH**  
**SUNDAY AFTER**  
**PENTECOST**  
**SEPTEMBER 24, 2023**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Pop ham**

Was Jesus a capitalist or a Communist? That's just a tease. If Jesus were a member of any party, it likely was the Pharisees, which was a sect of Judaism, along with the Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots, each of which maintained a particular theology and a distinctive agenda. Though we might recall that Jesus overturned tables in the Temple to disrupt its activities much like a demonstrator lying down across I-10 to block traffic. And, of course, within a week he had been crucified as any rabblrouser by Roman occupiers intent on maintaining law and order.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, we'll let the question of Jesus' views on the economy linger over our musings on this morning's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, noting that the beauty and challenge of parables is their susceptibility to numerous and varied interpretations.

Back in the day, which as we get older seems much more memorable than yesterday or last month, if we travelled by air frequently, we could consult a hefty volume called the Official Airline Guide. It was published monthly and listed every flight and connection between city pairs for all the commercial airlines.

And, of course, it listed the fares, which were set by the Civil Aeronautics Board and were always the same between city pairs for all the airlines. Aisle seats and window seats cost no more than center seats and no less than exit rows or bulkheads. And first-class fares were maybe 20-25 per cent higher than coach fares.

In 1953, United Airlines flight 600 from Chicago to New York, was designated as "The New York Executive," "for men only." Back in the day. Kind of takes our breath away.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus was an indigenous Jew in a homeland invaded and occupied by the army of the Roman Empire, a situation made worse by the collaboration of Jewish religious leaders with the Roman occupiers. Jesus would speak truth to power, gain a large following, and pay the usual price, death by crucifixion, a penalty that could be imposed only and carried out by the Romans.

<sup>2</sup> *The Official Guide to the Railways* (New York: National Railway Publication Co., September 1956) 97. The irony of the inclusion of airline schedules (and steamship schedules) in the railway guide

In any event, with the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, airfares today change moment by moment it seems, set by complex algorithms that take into account, demand, supply, the number of seats available, the pitch and location of the seats and time of purchase.<sup>3</sup> The result, of course, is that the person in the seat across the aisle or in front of or behind us probably paid a different fare for essentially the same seat. So maybe we should take a breath before we get in a lather about the seeming injustice in the parable.

Work all day in the hot sun and get paid a day's wage. Work one hour at the end of the day and get paid the same day's wage. Doesn't seem fair. Or was it?

The first-century Judean labor market that provides context for Jesus' parable involved an urgent demand for workers. The grape harvest had to be completed before the fall rains came and ruined the crop.

But the workers also desperately needed work. Their daily wage provided only a hand to mouth existence. It offered no margin for saving. No work for a day could mean hungry children.

So every morning workers would pick up their tools and go to the marketplace in search of work. If they were fortunate, they were hired early on and could expect full day's pay. But that some would wait all day until late in the afternoon showed how urgently they needed work.

At the same time, the landowner had an urgent need for workers, as evidenced in the parable by the landowner's repeated return to the marketplace. So the workers in the late afternoon arguably had some bargaining power of their own. Consider, too, that working for less than a day's wage just may not have been worth it. The parable does not speak to which side had the upper hand in the transaction. We do not know whether the landowner was being generous or just responding to marketplace pressures when he paid his late afternoon workers a full day's wage. But he was free to bargain with workers, as they were free to bargain with him. And he was free to be as generous as he wished.

Jesus hardly would begrudge the landowner his desire to provide a living wage to the workers. Nor would he have seen any issue with the workers' desire for a living wage. But he likely would have had a dim view of those workers who did whine about the deals they made when others got a better deal.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Algorithm Behind Plane Ticket Prices and How to Get the Best Deal," *Illumin Magazine* (July 1, 2019) <https://illumin.usc.edu/the-algorithm-behind-plane-ticket-prices-and-how-to-get-the-best-deal/> (accessed September 14, 2023).

Indeed, the straightforward theological understanding of this parable is reassuring. The inconceivable generosity of the landowner who paid the same wage to every worker no matter what time they began work points to God's unbounded, unconditional generosity, to God's grace. God's grace cannot be quantified. It cannot be stored up.

We cannot have more or less of God's grace than anyone else. Grace cannot be bargained for. It cannot be earned. It is not a reward for work done. After all, the word grace is derived from the Latin *gratis*, which means "free." We just need to show up.

The parable also has been understood to reveal the adequacy of the so-called deathbed confessions. So be it for the moment. We will not plunge into that theological rabbit hole. We will note only anecdotal reports from some who have died and been resuscitated that as they hurtled into a deep, dark, demonic abyss of death, they cried for help from Jesus and immediately were met with angels.<sup>4</sup>

But let's also look deeper into the religious context of the time. The early Church formed within the Jewish community. Those first Jewish followers of Jesus saw the Gentiles who later began to follow Jesus as interlopers and latecomers that should be accorded only an inferior position in the Church. In the same vein, Jesus' earliest disciples may have felt themselves special and entitled to greater position and honor than latecomers to the movement. And this parable suggests that Jesus would have had none of that.

But whatever current political category Jesus might fit into, if any, maybe we should just appreciate and accept God's imponderable love for us. That God has given us everything, starting with our very lives. As we pray in that wonderful prayer at conclusion of Morning and Evening Prayer, the General Thanksgiving, "We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life..."<sup>5</sup> None of which we have to do one thing to earn. But all of which suggest the only appropriate and rational response, that we give our entire lives, that we give everything we have, to the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. After all, with God, we are everything. Without God we are nothing.

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Price, *Revealing Heaven* (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2013) 35-36. The Rev. John Price has been an Episcopal Priest since 1965.

<sup>5</sup> BCP 101.