

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a bit of grapevine or any other harvest symbols at the center of your group. Open a bible and light a candle nearby.

To prepare for reflecting on the gospel, identify together those in our society whom we call or label as last among us. Take turns naming such groups. After each, pray:

ALL: The last shall be first.

LEADER: God of every hour, the first hour and the last, all-encompassing weaver of the cosmic web, help us to listen each other's experience of you into words.

ALL: Help us welcome the grace of every person and age. Amen.

We in western culture inherit a distant, transcendent God from the thinkers of the Enlightenment. This 18th-century movement questioned traditional values, exalted the individual, and emphasized human reasoning. Its theologians describe God by projecting human qualities to an infinite degree. God is all-knowing, all-seeing, omnipotent, ever-present.

In the 21st century we are finding the Enlightenment concept of God inadequate. Suffering people can't believe in an all-knowing God who doesn't

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

hear them. Third World poor people insist the transcendent God is the God of the First-World privileged, who keep God distant to preserve the status quo that favors them on earth.

Women often find that the divine king imagery for God subjects them to men on earth and alienates them from their own deepest spiritual experiences. The young question a God whose image has not evolved with science and the view of Earth from the moon.

Now as we live into the postmodern era, many theologians see God compassionately involved with every creature. God suffers with the suffering—with soldiers who put their lives on the line to defend their country and with people caught in war between rival factions. This God went to the gas chambers with the victims of the Holocaust. This God is with victims of violence and with the perpetrators.

God sides with the oppressed to liberate them. God hears the cry of the poor for life. The Creator calls us to care for Earth rather than dominate

it. God gives humans the capabilities to co-create the human community. How this process will turn out is open-ended. The God of Sunday's gospel is irrationally loving and generous beyond all reason.

● **Describe the God on whom your heart rests, the one you trust at your center.**



GOSPEL



What are just wages in God's vineyard?

NARRATOR: Jesus told his disciples this parable.

JESUS: The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the workers 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 said to them—

HOUSEHOLDER: You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is just.

JESUS: So they went. When the landowner went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. At five o'clock he went out and found others standing around.

HOUSEHOLDER: Why are you standing here idle all day?

LABORERS: Because no one has hired us.

HOUSEHOLDER: You also go into the vineyard.

JESUS: When evening came, the owner of the vineyard spoke to his manager.

HOUSEHOLDER: Call the workers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.

JESUS: 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. When they received it, they grumbled against the householder.

FIRST: 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.

HOUSEHOLDER: 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?

JESUS: So the last will be first and the first will be last.

Matthew 20.1-16

change, and bear fruit. Like vines, communities of believers need care and cultivation to flourish.

Matthew 19, the chapter preceding Sunday's parable about vineyard workers, touches on matters of status in the Christian community—the legality of divorce, the place of children, the status of those who keep the commandments, the possibility of the rich entering heaven, the status of those who leave all possessions to follow Jesus. The saying, "Many who are first will be last and the last will be first," concludes this chapter (19.30).

Twice more Matthew repeats this message—at the end of Sunday's gospel and later in chapter 20 when the question comes up of who will sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his messianic kingdom. Jesus insists, "Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave" (20.27). Matthew is at work calling the prosperous in his community to reorder their assets toward the poor, to conceive a more egalitarian order for the Church community than that in the social world of his time.

● What do you think makes a person first or last in our society? In Jesus eyes?

Matthew calls Christians to form inclusive communities.

Only Matthew tells Sunday's parable, the first of three set in vineyards. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah and Psalm 80 imagine the people of Israel

as God's vineyard, a metaphor the gospel writers apply to the Christian community. Like vines that take root, grow, and become fruitful over many years, people and communities of faith live,

The hiring part of Sunday's parable values work in the vineyard over idleness in the marketplace. Throughout the day the householder transforms the idle into active workers.

The parable emphasizes that the householder hires the first workers for the full, 12-hour day at the usual daily wage, one denarius. To the workers who begin at nine, the owner promises what is just. At this point in the parable Matthew characteristically begins to summarize. The householder does the same hiring at noon, three, and five.

This is the proportion of idle hours to work hours, indexed by hiring time.

6 A.M.: Idle 0 hours; work 12.
9 A.M.: Idle 3 hours; work 9.
Noon: Idle 6 hours; work 6.
3 P.M.: Idle 9 hours; work 3.
5 P.M.: Idle 11 hours; work 1.

When the last workers hired become the first workers paid, the householder demonstrates the new ordering in his house. The last receive a full day's wage. Immediately, the first hired have hopes of higher pay than they agreed to at their hiring. They reason that a worker ought to receive pay proportional to hours of work or amount of work completed. When the owner pays the last

workers a full day's wage, he establishes a whole new pay scale that will boost their earnings.

When the first workers receive their denarius, they remind the vineyard owner that they bore the burden of the day and its scorching heat. They want more than the last workers.

Finding out someone's salary unfailingly sets most of us to calculating what our own worth ought to be in relation to the other person.

- **What would you say to the generous vineyard owner?**
- **When have you received more than you deserve?**

When the householder pays the 11th-hour workers a full day's wage, he reorients the parable. It is no longer about the wages workers deserve but about the householder's generosity and a Christian social order.

The vineyard owner pays the full-day wage, the amount workers hope to make each day, even to those who don't find work until the last hour. In effect, he shows a preferential option for the last, for the poorest. This is



DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Visit [PovertyUSA](http://PovertyUSA.org) to explore what life is like at the poverty line. This is a website of the United States Bishops Conference Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Take the Poverty Tour or explore Poverty Facts.
- Research the concept of a living wage, the amount a person or family needs to provide the basic necessities. Visit the [living wage calculator](http://livingwagecalculator.org) online to find the living wage in your area. How might a living wage help or hinder you or your business?

a basic principle in liberation theology.

The householder's largesse invites us to ponder who this employer really is. As an image of God the householder is not transcendent and distant. The householder repeatedly seeks workers in the marketplace and cares enough about their well-being to pay them all the living wage.

The householder doesn't blame those standing idle in the marketplace for not getting a job earlier. He models how the prosperous should treat the poor. His generosity might antagonize a person so put off by socialism that he refuses to let his children share their candy with their cousins.

In *Laudato Si'*, his apostolic exhortation on care for our common home, Pope Francis stresses the common good, a gospel-centered principle that together we must provide for and protect the poorest among us rather than allow them to face perils. "Where injustices

abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters" (#158).

The equal wages in this parable represent more than economic concern for the poorest. The workers all stand in the same relationship to the one householder, to God who owns the vineyard of all creation. The resources of creation are for all. The social order in this vineyard is like a circle, in which no one has a place of privilege.

- How like the vineyard owner is your God?
- Who is last in our church and civic communities? Who is first?
- Who should be last and first?



Seek God where God can be found.

Sunday's first reading comes from the final chapter of the prophet Second Isaiah's writing, his call to the people of Israel in exile to join in a grand procession home to Jerusalem. The chapter begins with God's invitation home, "Come to the feast where food is free and choice." Then Sunday's passage follows.

For the exiles God acts in the person of Cyrus, the enlightened Persian general who defeats their Babylonian captors and sends them home to rebuild their city. God who was distant has come near in these events to bring Israel home. God will be found again in the temple.

Isaiah's call to return.

Seek God where God may be found, call upon God while God is near.

Let the wicked forsake their way, and the evil their plans.

Let them return to God that God may have mercy on them, to our God, who will lavish forgiveness on them.

For my plans are not your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says God. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my plans above your plans.

Isaiah 55.6-9

- What does Isaiah's picture of God contribute to the God of your faith?
- How does it compare with the vineyard owner?

PRAY

To conclude your reflections, make a commitment to do one small act toward making someone who is last first in your priorities.

LEADER: Generous, creative God, you call us to leave none of those you love in hopeless poverty.

Group members express their commitments.

LEADER: Let us pray for people who must work two jobs.

ALL: And seek ways to help.

LEADER: Let us pray for those who work without health benefits.

ALL: And seek ways to help.

LEADER: Let us pray for those newly laid off.

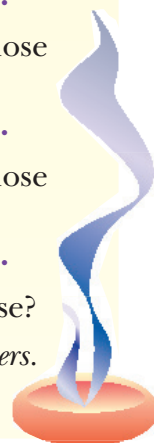
ALL: And seek ways to help.

LEADER: Let us pray for those who can find no work.

ALL: And seek ways to help.

LEADER: And for whom else?

Group members add their prayers. Exchange a sign of peace.



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Sister Joan, Editor

