

## WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

Prepared by the WDP of the Philippines

March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017

“Am I Being Unfair to You?”

Bible Study 1 - Matthew 20:1-16

**Bible text:** Matthew 20:1-16

**The social context of the Bible story:** the verses were written in the context of an agriculture based economy. The grounds are prepared, the crops are planted and tended, and the community will wait for harvest time. If there is ample rain, the plants will grow, thrive and bear fruit. On the other hand, improper care including pests and insects, bad weather or other accidents, natural or human made, will expose the crops and lessen its produce, or possibly wipe everything out completely.

Since the place is stony and hilly, preparing the ground and tending the plants can be exhausting work. In addition, the weather conditions (hot, humid, or cold) will add to the discomfort of the laborers (Matt 20:12).

The work is also seasonal and intense. Harvesting crops, such as grapes, has a strict timeline in order to reap the fruits in its prime and while they are juicy and sweet. When harvest time comes, the master of the vineyard starts to recruit people. In fact the workers are milling around the marketplace waiting for an opportunity to work in the vineyards. Some of them are already former laborers in the vineyard, however when there is a good harvest, more laborers are needed. So people wait in the marketplace in hopes that that day, they will have some work and earn something to take home to feed their family. The laborers called for this purpose are hired hands for a certain period of time. They are not permanent workers.

The place of recruit is probably at a public venue, market, or pub. Those who are known to the vineyard master will probably be called from their homes or via word of mouth.

**Similarity with the Philippine context:** In Negros Occidental in the Philippines, where the economy is driven by the production of sugar, there are workers who reside in the plantations. They are given a modest place for shelter with their families. During the off seasons, they hoe, weed and do other work to tend the crops. So they are the first ones to be hired during harvest time. One very outstanding feature of the hiring is the inclusion of women and children. Sometimes the baby is also brought to the field, with a minimum of shade and some prepared food.

For the more intense job of harvesting however, where there is a time limit for a certain produce like sugarcane or rice, the workers are recruited by agents or contractors. They bring a large number of men from another place to do the harvesting. The laborers have to leave their families for a number of months, so they usually ask some portion of the wage in advance to take care of basic family needs. These monies are considered loans with interest. One can imagine that after harvest season, the interest will eat up their wages with very little to bring home to their families. One can also infer that the wages are far below the standards for a decent life. It can only feed one or two persons at most. Taking into account the average sized Filipino family of six, the income of a typical laborer is not enough for his family. The economic injustice is evident - the

landowner has a big house and enough food on the table, while the families of the laborers live below the standard of a decent life.

**Agricultural economy in both contexts:**

1. High unemployment in both the urban and rural areas - at the time of the writing, 12 million Filipinos were unemployed, with most of them in the agricultural sector;
2. Seasonal work - in an agricultural economy, there is work during planting and harvest time. In an industrial economy, there is work when there is an increase in demand for goods and services, like high demand for goods before and during Christmas time.
3. Contractual work - daily, *pakyaw*, or working on a project for a specific amount of time for an agreed amount, usually 5 months for every contract to avoid hiring the person permanently.
4. No work, no pay - no work on weekends, so no wages either. No paid time off like holidays, sick days, or absences, and no access to health benefits.
5. In an agricultural economy, one hectare of rice land can only produce 24,000 pesos annually. Water is essential for rice fields. The irrigation system, rain harvest, and wells are essential to a good production.

**Role play of the Bible Text:** Matthew 20:1-16 (New International Version)

Note: When planning the role play, ask the participants to internalize the role of the landowner and the laborers, thereby deepening the understanding of the people in the Scripture.

Narrator: For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them,

Landowner - You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.

Narrator - So they went. The landowner went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. At about five in the afternoon he went out and still found others standing around. He asked them,

Landowner - Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?

Laborers - No one has hired us.

Landowner - You also go and work in my vineyard.

Narrator - When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman,

Landowner - Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.

Narrator - The workers who were hired last, at five in the afternoon, came and each received a denarius. So when those who were hired first came, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

Laborers (the one hired first): These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

Landowner - I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?

Narrator - So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

*It is harvest time.*

Harvest time is a time of plenty. It is a time to celebrate. That is why in many of our churches, we celebrate thanksgiving and we bring to the altar the first fruits of the field as an offering.

A laborer is excited in anticipation of work. Work is not just a means to buy the basic needs for the family, but also a contribution for a just economy. Labor dignifies the person and the community, and should be a source of social equality and a decent life where basic rights are accessible. However, in the Bible story, Jesus used the landowner's generosity of paying the workers equally, though they labored different hours, as a gesture to understand what the kingdom of heaven is like. Why are the ones who spent most of the day not working, paid the same amount as the ones that worked all day? What was the need of Matthews' community to have Jesus telling a story such as this? What does it say to us today? What does the kingdom of heaven look like today?

#### **Exercise for group conversation:**

1. Freeze game for reality check
  - Divide the participants in small groups to facilitate the conversation
  - Ask each group to create a scenario based on a work situation, for example:
    - child working on the field with parents
    - workers that receive little pay for hard labor
    - women working while tending a child beside her or on her back
  - Allow five minutes to prepare and dramatize the scenario, then the leaders shout Freeze! Everybody freezes in the working situation.
  - Give some time for the participants to observe each scenery, and then encourage group conversation.
2. Suggestion of question for the groups:
  - If you were in that situation, what would you do?

#### **Thoughts for conversation:**

*Where it all started: God's economic justice.*

God, the creator provided the creation with the materials (earth, sea, sky, rain, sun, moon, air) to live a productive life. The provisions are for everybody to enjoy. Not one is excluded. God gave humankind the life, strength, intelligence, emotions, and discernment in order to make sense of and use God's gift to the utmost.

In the Bible, we are told that each tribe of Israel was given a piece of land for their home and sustenance. The land was given to all. It could not be sold. That is why there was a year of jubilee, where all land must be returned to the original state or to the tribe where it was assigned. Nobody owned the land.

*Where we are now: pakyaw*

Somewhere along the way, the situation changed. There are those who own large tracts of land or vineyards, while others become laborers or hired hands. In effect, the Bible text pointed out this situation in an agricultural society. In the Philippines, situations like these are plenty. Look at the large sugarcane and banana plantations. There is plenty of work during planting and harvest time, but none in between.

Formerly, the work arrangement was that they were to be paid on a daily basis. Now the land owners engaged the laborers in pakyaw. Pakyaw is a contract between the worker and owner to finish a piece of work within the required time, and they are to be paid a fixed amount. The landowner prefers this method because the worker is motivated to finish the work quickly and with minimum supervision. The worker also prefers this arrangement because they can schedule their work hours. However the worker has no permanent tenure. The fair payment is a challenge.

*Filipino cultural practice: dagyaw*

In a community where many people cultivate rice farms, neighbors are called to help with the planting. The process is called dagyaw, and it is intense work because the planting must be finished within the day. The neighbors are only fed, and not paid for the planting; however the rice harvested is shared among the ones who planted together. This practice continues until all farms are planted or harvested. Dagyaw is a good way of building and sustaining a community, an actualization of compassion and care for each other.

*Am I being unfair to you? God's call for justice!*

A recent report of OXFAM in 2015 stated that 1% of the world's population holds 99% of the world's wealth. In the Philippines, 20% of the population owns 80% of the nation's wealth. In order to overcome and gradually reduce the gap between the haves and the have nots, we must plant the seeds of justice, so we can all share the harvest.

### **Exercise for group conversation:**

1. Swap shop
  - Divide the participants in small groups to facilitate the conversation
  - The topic of the conversation is to discuss how churches, and especially women, can plant and nurture the seed of economic justice, which includes food, education, and better living conditions for all.
  - Each group is asked to present a new idea of planting and nurturing economic justice. Each idea should be written on a flash card.
  - Ask some of the participants to form a panel of "experts". They will rate the group idea from 1-10. The idea with the highest grade will be chosen and discussed further for implementation.
2. Informed prayer and prayerful action
  - Use the ideas discussed to motivate the local WDP community and churches to support and engage in the continuing struggle for justice for all of God's creation.

*This material is part of the worship service and educational resource for the 2017 WDP annual celebration.*

*For further information, please, contact:*

World Day of Prayer International Committee  
475 Riverside Drive Room 729.  
New York, NY. 10115. USA

[admin@worlddayofprayer.net](mailto:admin@worlddayofprayer.net) - <http://worlddayofprayer.net>