

The Abundant Life

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Text: Matthew 20:1-16

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Once upon a time, there was a lovely little boy whose name was Biff. Every night, before he went to bed, Biff's mom would read a picture book to Biff. Biff's favourite book was *Goodnight Moon* and whenever his mother finished reading that book, Biff would look out of his bedroom window and wish and wish that he could fly away to the moon.

Anyway, one morning, Biff's mother came home with a new stove and this gave Biff an idea. Biff asked her for the large box it came in. Next, they cut a hole in the side of the box for a window. Biff then borrowed a kitchen stool, loaded up on cookies and licorice for supplies, and told his mother that from now on he was "Spaceman Biff," and that he was going to fly, fly away to the moon, and would she like to come along?

Biff's mother replied, "Yeah, but . . . you know we can't really fly to the moon." Yeah . . . but. "After all, you're just five years old, and neither of us have gone to astronaut school, and the box is too small for us anyway, and if we went, I couldn't cook supper for you and your dad."

And what she meant was, "Yeah! What a great idea! But . . . I don't really feel like it." Or, perhaps, "Yeah, but my life is too busy to play with you now."

"Yeah, but." We've all heard it a million times. "Yeah!" You affirm the speaker, because something deep inside of you knows that the speaker gets it, that the speaker has spoken truly. "Yeah," followed by "but!" a barely polite, usually underhanded way of undermining what you just said "Yeah" to, while rationalizing away your "no." "Yeah, but."

Today's parable is for everyone who has ever said, "yeah, but." That includes me, by the way. The parable goes like this.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . . *the kingdom of heaven?* What is Jesus talking about?

Well, Jesus is talking about how things on earth should be as in heaven, like in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus is talking about a utopia, a shangri-la. Jesus' parable is about a world where prisons have room to spare because crime is down, where global warming is cooling, where there is plenty of profit for entrepreneurs and plenty jobs for the poor. The Biblical word is shalom.

Back to the parable. Matthew says the kingdom of heaven on earth is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. "A landowner?" thinks Jesus' audience.

"Wonderful!" You see, few Jews owned vineyards because the occupying Romans used their tax system to bankrupt Jewish farmers. The few Jews who did own vineyards were enemy collaborators. So, already in the first line of this parable, Jesus is suggesting that one day Jews

will again own land, grow grapes, and work for a good wage. And the people listening thought, “Yeah! That’s heaven on earth!”

Back to the parable. Matthew says the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers. And so he did.

A little later in the day, the landowner went to town again. The parable doesn’t say, “he went to town to find more workers.” No, he just went out for fun. He was a man of liesure. He had time to walk about. And when he did so, he found people just standing around looking for work—lined up on the street corners the same way that undocumented Mexicans line up on street corners all over Texas and California. Seeing these people, desperate for work, the landowner decided to hire them. He was a compassionate man. He did so at noon, again at three, and again at five, just before quitting time! He hired one and all. And the people in the audience are shaking their heads and saying, “Yeah! What a great guy! Heaven on earth!”

So finally it is six pm and time to pay the workers. They line up. The workers who spent the whole day in the vineyard get an honest day’s wages. “Yeah! Heaven on earth!” The workers who came at nine also get a full day’s wages—and the earlier workers raise their eyebrows. The workers who started at three also get a full day’s pay, and finally, so do the workers who worked for only an hour. And so the early workers—and Jesus’ audience, says, “Yeah! But.”

“Yeah, but, it isn’t fair that we got sunstroke and they didn’t, but we all get the same wage!” And “It isn’t fair that they get a full day’s pay for an hour’s work.” And so on. “Yeah, but.”

The landowner responds. “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Now remember, this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven—on earth; a parable about how things should be.

So, in Jesus’ kingdom, everyone gets a living wage. There is no poverty. In Jesus’ kingdom, as we discovered a few weeks ago, there is neither male nor female, gay nor straight, Jew nor Greek, Black nor First Nations. In Jesus’ kingdom, you let the children come. In Jesus’ kingdom, you give your coat to the poor, water and bread to the prisoner, turn the other cheek to your enemy, and open your door to the stranger. And so on.

And we usually say, “Yeah! But . . .”

Yeah, we’re for an end to racism, but blacks have to understand that they look threatening walking down the street. Yeah, we’re for an end to racial profiling, but those First Nations people in our jails really were dealing drugs and creating a disturbance. Yeah we’re for an end to poverty, but all those homeless people are mentally ill, or lazy, or uneducated, or stupid, or asking for it. Yeah, we’re for an end to global warming, but the Chinese should stop burning coal first. Yeah we’re for a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the

Palestinians have to stop using violence to get their Israeli-army-conquered territory back. Yeah, but. It is a way of agreeing in principle but excusing yourself of ever having to really go there.

In English grammar, “but,” is what is called an adversative conjunction. As in “adversary.” As in “enemy.” The “but” in most of our “Yeah, but,” statements is a fighting word, lightly camouflaged.

Look, I know that a living wage for all, or an end to racism, or an end to global warming are very difficult goals. I know that in our pursuit for social justice we can burn out, or get bored, or not be bothered. I know that the problems we face are huge. Heaven on earth seems, to us, not so much a nice place as a pipe dream.

Yeah, but . . . two things. First, the right response in such a situation is not to fight the dream, or deny it with a “but . . .” The right response is to say, “Yeah . . . what can I do,” or “Yeah, so what is the next step?” or “Yeah, I hear you. That concerns me too, even though I am focussed on another issue in my personal life.” Or “Yeah, it is a tough problem, how are you managing with it.” The right response is usually not, “Yeah but.” It is, rather, “Yeah, tell me about it. I’m listening.”

None of us can, and none of us have been asked, to sacrifice all to work on all the things we want to see changed. A lot is wrong with the world, after all. Most of us can work hard on only one or two things at a time. So do that . . . don’t burn yourself out . . . while opening yourself to listening empathetically to, and dreaming with, people working on other projects. Don’t “Yeah! But . . .” them. Bless them, instead.

Secondly, in this parable the hero the landowner, is a rich man. He is unlike his workers in that he has liesure, and extra resources, land, and comforts. He is living the life of Riley in ancient Israel.

So notice that Jesus doesn’t condemn him for being rich. Jesus doesn’t wag his finger at him and insist that he has to pay everyone a living wage. Jesus doesn’t tell him to “sin no more.” No, Jesus actually seems to like this rich person quite a bit. That’s something more than a few of us in this congregation need to keep in mind. Riches are okay with Jesus. He was the one who said, after all, “I came that all may have life, and have it abundantly.”

However, when it comes to social justice, don’t let your riches, whether you came by them through inheritance, good luck, or hard work—don’t let your riches make you feel like a second class citizen when it comes to social justice. The rich are strategic players in the cause of kingdom of heaven on earth—no “buts” about it. If you have financial resources, even if it stretches you, you can do a lot for social justice and shalom—more, maybe, than the guy who only found work for an hour in the parable. This, in a world of want, is a great privilege.

The thing is, whatever your gift—whether of time, or money, or insight, bring it to the table. Exercise it. Just say, “Yeah.”

Just say, "Yeah. I hear you." Or, "yeah, that's tough." It may not be enough to bring heaven down to earth, but it can make a big difference for the one you're listening to. And, it can help all of us keep the dream alive.