

Laborers in the Vineyard Bible Study

One-hour Session

(Use in place of Session 3, "Globalization: Neighbor and Neighborhood")

Globalization is bringing changes to many of our communities. In some communities big corporations are moving in and recruiting new workers from other places. Globalization's free trade policies are pushing people out of their own communities and countries in search of a means for economic survival. Many corporations are leaving communities, seeking other locations within in the United States or in other countries where labor costs may be cheaper or environmental regulations fewer. These factors are bringing changes in relationships within communities that challenge Christians to seek a new understanding of God's vision of abundant life for all.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard tells the story of a community where workers arrived at different times looking for work. The workers had different attitudes and differing expectations of their own privilege. Seeking to understand this story can give us some ways to think about globalization's impact on our lives and God's intention for us in these changing times, especially as the people of the United States wrestle with the complex realities of immigration and immigrant rights as a part of the struggle for economic justice for all.

Focus

This Bible Study focuses on the differences between God's understanding of 'fairness and equality' and the understandings we often hear in our communities in the face of changes brought by globalization.

Goals

- To reflect on the reactions of the groups of different day laborers in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.
- To consider God's perspective on the equality of the workers in the parable.

Materials and Supplies

- Five groups of chairs, or five tables with chairs
- Signs to designate groups (see Preparation)

- Slips of paper numbered 1-5
- Copies of handouts for participants
- Newsprint and markers
- Hymnals

Preparation

- Arrange chairs or tables in to five groups so that the participants can be subdivided into groups representing the five groups of laborers in the parable. Make the following signs and place on tables or in the center of groups of chairs:
 - #1- early morning
 - #2 -nine o'clock
 - #3 - 12 o'clock
 - #4 - 3 o'clock
 - #5 - 5 o'clock
- Prepare copies of handout sheets, " Matthew 20: 1-16" and "Mutuality Principles" for each person.
- Print the following on newsprint and post where it can be easily seen:
 - Outline key points about the situation from the perspective of your group of workers.

Opening Activity

As participants arrive, give each one a slip of paper with a number. Ask them to sit in a group with others who have the same number.

1.Introduce the Bible Study (5 minutes)

SAY:

The Bible study today will be the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, a parable that has some interesting parallels with our current reality. Jesus told this parable just shortly before his entry into Jerusalem. In the conversation that precedes this story the issue of what must be done to have eternal life was raised. One young man went away sad because he found it too hard to contemplate the price of giving away all his possessions. Peter also voiced his concern about the future of the disciples who had given up everything to follow Jesus. Jesus reassured Peter that there is enough in God's

economy for all, but that no one's place is assured. The story of the laborers in the vineyard provided an illustration of this meaning.

Read aloud, or ask a volunteer to read, the entire text (Matthew 20-1-16).

Learning Activities

2. Discussing Perspectives (10 minutes)

Say that each table is assigned the identity of one of the five groups of laborers in the story on the basis of the time of day that they began work. Ask participants to think about the differences in attitudes of different people in a community and to reflect on the following:

- How long has your group been in the community?
- How do you feel about what happened to your group of laborers?
- If these were laborers in your own community, what might be the racial and ethnic identity of different groups?
- How are your feelings affected by your group's past history in the community?
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Invite participants to take ten minutes for discussion, addressing the questions and sharing their feelings about the outcome of the parable. Encourage them to list key points to share with the larger group.

3. Reporting Back (10 Minutes)

After ten minutes invite the groups to come together to share their small group discussion. Begin with the group identified as "early morning" and take brief comments from each group of laborers. Ask each group to identify who they are in the community-- what race, ethnicity, economic status, and so forth, as a way of understanding the attitudes that they have. Encourage the groups to express the feelings of anger, frustration, or relief that their group is experiencing. On newsprint, jot down notes on the groups' views

4. Exploring Mutuality (15 minutes)

Reread verses 13-16 aloud again. **ASK:**

- **What do we learn about God's principles of equality and fairness that seems to be at odds with the reactions of the laborer groups that we have just heard?**

Give time for a few brief responses, recording the responses on newsprint.

ASK:

- **Do you think these workers have a common stake in what happens?**

Distribute copies of the handout "Mutuality". Invite participants to think now about what would happen if the workers considered ways to work together so that all might benefit. Say that these statements are taken from *Mutuality in Mission*, a book by Glory and Jacob Dharmaraj. Glory is on the staff of the Women's Division and her husband is a local pastor. Assign the following tasks for this second small group discussion:

1. Each table should first pick two principles that apply to their situation and try to see these concepts of mutuality from the perspective of their group.
2. Then have groups discuss the following:
 - How might these principles inform/change our response to issues of immigrant rights and economic justice within our own communities, nationally and internationally today?
 - How can we use these principles to guide our discussion of economic justice and the promise of abundant life for all, whatever our starting point?

5. Reporting Back and Wrapping Up (10 minutes)

Invite one representative from each table to share one insight from their discussion and how it might help United Methodist Women at the local, district, conference and national level to think about an approach to immigrant rights and economic justice in the light of globalization.

Wrap up the discussion by inviting participants to continue to think about globalization especially as it affects immigrant and refugee rights, keeping in mind the goal of economic justice for all. Encourage them to use what they have learned about God's understanding of fairness and equality as a guide for their actions and to strive to put some of the principles of mutuality in mission into practice.

Closing Worship

6. Sing together (5 minutes)

Sing one of the hymns suggested for Session 3 on page 130 in the study guide.

7. Sung Prayer (5 minutes)

Invite participants to offer prayers aloud for economic justice and God's shalom in the world. After each prayer, sing "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying" (*The Faith We Sing*)

Matthew 20:1-16

The Laborers in the Vineyard

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers 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 market place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." 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. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "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."

But he replied to one of them, "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?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

-New Revised Standard Version

Mutuality

If you come to help me, you can go home again. But if you see my struggles as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together.
--Lila Watson, *An Aboriginal Woman from Australia*

Mutuality is an attitude. It is an environment. It does not form on its own. It evolves when the partners realize there is love, trust, and acceptance.

Mutuality is sharing power in such a way that each [person] is called forth more fully into becoming who she/he is—a whole person.

Mutuality is committed to a culture of equality.

Mutuality opens a dialogue. It enables partners to communicate honestly and behave with integrity. We see the world from the other's perspective.

Mutuality enables [people] to change their view of those who are different.

Mutuality means understanding, acknowledging and respecting cultural and racial differences.

Mutuality does not provide room to control the other.

Mutuality has no room for the spirit of narrow patriotism. [It] transcends jingoism, individualism, political idealism and economic greed.

Mutuality...authentic mutual relations will not be created in the absence of justice.