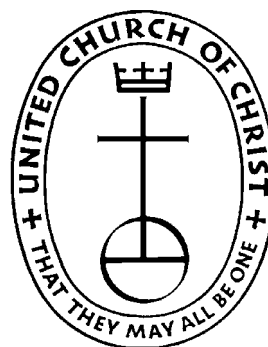


# Penny and the Med Students

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
January 31, 2010



This sermon uses the story of a girl with Down syndrome and Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard to discuss God's extravagant welcome – our welcome can and must be just as open.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

© 2010 Jerald M. Stinson

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
January 31, 2010 (#1390)  
Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

## Penny and the Med Students

Willamette University Professor Steve Patterson asked, “What did the followers of Jesus experience in his company that moved them to claim that in his words and deeds they had come to know who God is?”

To answer that question, I think we must understand what it meant to live as an oppressed people in the Roman Empire.

Rome’s colonial territories, like ancient Israel, were to serve the imperial aspirations of the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace. What a phrase, because the “peace of Rome” was anything but peaceful. Roman historian Tacitus said, “to plunder, butcher, steal – these things they misname empire; they make a desolation and call it peace.”

Rome’s violent empire was built on control that divided people: a few powerful leaders at the top, a small middle class and then massive numbers of people that sociologist Gerhard Lensky calls the “expendables.” They were expendable because they had nothing to offer that was of value in the empire – landless peasants who counted for nothing in the eyes of those with power.

Jesus was himself one of those expendables – a peasant, itinerant sage who lived and taught among other expendables.

We are told that Jesus’ father Joseph was a “tekton” – a Greek word that might have meant an artisan making things out of wood but also could have meant a common day laborer. I can picture Joseph and his sons, including Jesus, walking to Sepphoris, a new Roman city near Nazareth, seeking work at one of the Roman building projects.

There was a real division between those with land and those without; between the rich and the poor. Jesus and his followers were poor and landless.

And other divisions made some expendables into outcasts.

Steve Patterson is the biblical scholar who has written most persuasively about those divisions. He said the expendables, the people who didn’t count, were often seen as unclean rather than clean, shamed rather than honored, sinners rather than righteous.

Unclean. No one wants to be dirty. Dirt belongs outside, in the fields, not on us or within us. But in the ancient world lepers with their sores, women with a flow of blood, the disabled who couldn't walk well or see clearly or hear accurately – all were seen as dirty.

Shame. Honor comes when you occupy a respected place in society so that others recognize that. But the expendables of Jesus' day were seen as shamed, not honored. Tax collectors, prostitutes, those who cared for animals, those on the margins of society experienced shame day after day. It became part of their identity. Since others felt they had no worth, it was easy for them to begin to feel that way about themselves.

Sin. If you were landless, unclean or shamed in ancient Israel, it was your fault; you must have sinned. Patterson said: "The governing assumption is that if someone operates outside the boundaries of social acceptability, it is not because there is no place for them in the social economy, but because they are somehow deficient in themselves. They are sinners."

Now Jesus' stories and sermons sought to counter that which would devalue the lives of other people. He said God's realm, the empire of God, is a place where expendables are welcomed and loved.

He said that realm is like a mustard seed, a hated weed in the ancient world, something unclean. It is like leaven the presence of which at Passover can make a house unclean. God's realm is for the unclean.

Jesus affirmed those labeled as shamed – he made it clear that God loved that woman at the well in Samaria scorned by others, that God loved Zacchaeus the tax gatherer, that God loved a woman caught in adultery. God's realm is for the shamed.

And Jesus said: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." He was talking about a social category, those labeled sinners. Later on scribes would add two more words to Jesus' phrase: "I came to call sinners 'to repentance.'" But those two words did not come from Jesus. He came to call those seen as sinners into the empire of God – to say to them, here is a place where you will be accepted and loved for who you are. God's realm is for those labeled as sinners.

Let me share with you one of Jesus' most fascinating stories:

*Heaven's imperial rule (or the Empire of God) is like an owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workers for the vineyard. After reaching an agreement with them for the usual daily wage, the owner sent them out to the vineyard.*

*About mid-morning the owner came out and saw others standing around the marketplace without work, and said to them, "You go along to my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is fair." At that they left.*

*Around noon and again in the mid-afternoon, the owner came out and did the same, Finally, going out late in the afternoon, the owner found still others standing around and said to them, "Why have you been here idle all day?"*

*"No one has hired us," they replied.*

*The owner said, "You go to my vineyard, too."*

*When evening came, the owner said to the overseer, "Call the workers and give them their pay, but begin with the last group and end with the first." When those hired late in the afternoon came up, they received a full day's pay, and when the first group appeared they assumed they would get more. Yet they all received the same daily wage.*

*Thereupon they complained to the owner. "This last group did only an hour's work, but you have put them on the same basis as those who worked a full day in the scorching heat."*

*"My friends," said the owner to those who voiced this complaint, "I do you no injustice. You agreed on the usual wage, didn't you? Take your pay and go home. I intend to give this worker who was hired last the same pay as you. I'm free to do as I please with my money, aren't I? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

Now I have preached on that parable many times, always focusing on issues of justice and generosity. But a recent article by Amy Julia Becker, a ministerial student at Princeton Theological Seminary, helped me see it from a different perspective. She pushed me to ask myself, for perhaps the first time, who were those workers hired at the last hour?

All of the workers were expendables, all landless peasants seeking work in the fields of a rich and powerful landowner. But who among those expendables got selected first and who was selected last?

I couldn't help but think of my childhood and those agonizing moments when sandlot baseball teams were chosen. I loved baseball, but I was small and not athletically gifted. We kids would gather at the park every summer day where the two biggest kids would deem themselves captains of the two teams.

The rest of us would line up as the two captains alternated choosing their team members. I yearned to be selected somewhere in the middle. I knew I would never be the first, second or third – but fifth or sixth. I dreaded the possibility of being last – the player nobody wanted who would be sent to deep right field where nobody ever hit the ball, the one who would always bat last.

Was it something like that in Jesus' story? Did the landowner initially hire the biggest, strongest, healthiest laborers? Were those who were still waiting for work as the sun prepared to set – were they workers who were old, or perhaps living with some sort of disability that meant they might not be as productive in the fields as others, or maybe some were women – women without husbands, brothers, fathers to provide for them in a totally patriarchal society? Maybe they were the unclean, shamed, sinner expendables. Whoever those last workers were, they were at the bottom of the social pyramid.

Let me return to Amy Becker, the Princeton student. I want to tell you about her daughter and then about her take on Jesus' story. She wrote:

*There were five of us around the table: my husband, myself, my mother, and two medical students assigned to dinner at our house. One of them said, "My parents always wanted more for me – a better education than they had, a better job, a higher salary. So isn't it hard to have a child with a disability? Don't you want so much more for her?"*

*She said: These young men were in the midst of a pediatric rotation, and had one day to learn about children with disabilities. They arrived in late afternoon. Penny, our three-year-old daughter, who has Down syndrome, greeted them. "Hi," she said, her neck craning to see their faces. Soon enough they were sitting cross-legged on the floor, with Penny pouring tea and offering "tookies."*

*They spent an hour playing, and once Penny was in bed we ate together and talked about our family. As the night went on, these young men grew more and more candid. They told us that earlier in the day they had been asked to consider four different types of disability: spina bifida, cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome and disfiguring burns. If they were a parent, which one would they want most and least for their child? In ranking those categories, they had marked Down syndrome as the least desired.*

*Amy continued: Yet the reason they were telling us this story was that being in our home had changed their understanding of what it means to live with Down syndrome. They told us they were grateful for the evening not so much because it influenced their career as doctors, but because it had changed them as individuals. They had been*

*humbled by the opportunity to come to value another human being, in this case a human being with Down syndrome.*

Now Amy Becker went on to write that a few days later she read the parable about the landowner and the workers' wages. She said:

*It's a troubling story designed to challenge people with plenty of resources, religious piety and a college degree. People like the medical students sitting at our table, earnest, confident, smart and accomplished. People who think that the value of a human being can be measured by salary, educational achievements and leadership positions. Who think success in life comes because we have earned it, and that others only need to work harder to achieve what we have, whether in matters of faith or finances.*

*She said: I wasn't sure what to make of Jesus' words. Was I to conclude that diligence doesn't matter? That God doesn't care what I do? Or, that as someone who is "first" in this world, I am in trouble with God?*

*No, she said. I think Jesus is getting at something more. The land-owner doesn't devalue the workers who worked all day. [They were paid what they had agreed upon.] But the land-owner pays the workers who only worked an hour the same amount.*

*The workers hired last knew their status: outcast. Unemployed. Failure. Unworthy. By paying them first, and by paying them with a recognition that they had been trying to work all day long even if they hadn't actually been working, the landowner offers them a new self-understanding. Instead of seeing themselves as worthless, they can see themselves as valued. Just as valued as the winners, the ones who got the job with the contract at the beginning of the day.*

*Then she wrote: And in a parallel moment, I could envision Jesus at our kitchen table telling those medical students that for all their hard work, good grades and accolades, he didn't consider them any more important than this little girl with an extra 21<sup>st</sup> chromosome, with glasses, a speech delay and a hearing loss.*

*I could envision Jesus explaining that they each had something of equal worth to contribute to God's work in this world. [God's realm] had come among us, for just a moment, when those students saw Penny as a gift.*

This is our annual welcoming Sunday when we reaffirm the commitment this congregation made eighteen years ago to welcome into our membership, into our leadership, into our ministries of teaching and caring for people – those of all sexual orientations. But over those eighteen years, that welcome has become broader.

We have come to understand that our welcome must be extravagant and that we must proclaim with word and deed God's radically inclusive love. We must make sure that we truly do welcome people, whoever they are and wherever they are on life's journey.

There will perhaps be times in all of our lives when we will feel like outcasts; when we will fear that we will be chosen last if at all; when we will be the expendables – unclean, shamed, sinners. And in those moments, this sacred space must be one in which we feel welcome. And this community of faith must be one where all of us let go of our stereotypes; let go of distinctions about who is “in” and who is “out;” let go of the categories that would make some more worthy than others – where we simply try to be part of a community of love that understands what Jesus meant by the realm or the empire of God.

That's really the answer to Steve Patterson's question with which I began this sermon. “What did the followers of Jesus experience in his company that moved them to claim that in his words and deeds they had come to know who God is?” They experienced a radically inclusive, affirming, universal, unconditional and accepting love – God's love.

Let me end with those final words of Amy Becker:

*[God's realm] had come among us, for just a moment, when those medical students saw Penny as a gift.*

May we see everyone who walks into this room, into our lives, as a gift. Amen.