

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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XVI Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.ⁱ

My maternal grandfather was 20 years older than my maternal grandmother, at least as far as we know. His name was Ira D. Albright, but no one in our family knows whether that was an initial – as in, “D-period.” – or a middle name – as in, “D-e-e.” Little matter, because he re-named himself “Clay,” after “a wonderful town drunk who enjoyed the company of the square in Leonard, Texas,” as my family would tell the story.ⁱⁱ

And as that story continues, I.D. “Clay” Albright walked into a Shreveport, Louisiana department store in the late fall of 1936. After my grandmother, Frances Maxey, graduated high school in Lorena, Texas, she moved to Shreveport to find work and live with her older sister, Louene, and Louene’s husband, Charles. She found a job “on the floor” at Hearne’s, and, on this particular day, she was working the crowds of customers and modeling fur coats.

Upon seeing this young woman I would call “Granny” a half-century later, the Texas native approached another clerk named Nancy Bell (and I don’t mean “Bell” was her last name, I mean her name was *Nancy Bell*).

“Nancy Bell, who is that?” he asked.

“Clay Albright, that’s a nice girl, and you do not need to know her name.”

“Well, I sure do need to know her name,” he explained, “because I’m going to marry her.”

And Nancy Bell must have relented, or else he did his own detective work, because on February 26, 1937, not long after my grandmother’s twentieth birthday, the two married.ⁱⁱⁱ

In December of 1939, Granny delivered their first child, a daughter – my Aunt Nancy. My mother would arrive thirteen years later, and my Uncle Paul two years after that. And, then, in December of 1961, I.D. “Clay” Albright died.

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.”^{iv}

Many of Jesus’ parables prove difficult to understand, and his disciples frequently misinterpret the truth he intends in the stories that he tells. Adding to his followers’ difficulties, we – now with two thousand years between us and the culture, government, and economy of Jesus’ time and place – can struggle connecting with that world he references. Therefore, we postulate the U.S. dollar value of the ancient talent, and we study the biology of mustard seeds, all in the hope of unraveling the mystery of Jesus’ teachings.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard, however, makes no esoteric reference to either Galilean lending systems or Greco-Roman philosophies. Rather, its challenge is its timeless simplicity and clarity, for the parable is not difficult to understand, only hard to accept – for, like the first laborers in the vineyard we begrudge God’s generosity ... *we begrudge God’s generosity*, and, in our frailest moments, we *spite* the fellowship of God’s Church.

Striving for position and coddling our credentials – academic hoods and university seals, political affiliations and civic connections – this parable baits us into identifying ourselves as those strong-backed, stronger-willed, and better-read laborers who arrived at the vineyard before dawn and toiled all day. While waiting to receive what we have *earned*, we disbelieve God would show others preferential treatment, not only rewarding these wrong-headed, less-accomplished lemmings first, but lavishing upon them the very same welcome and praises more rightfully prepared for us.

And disagreeing with the Lord’s order of things, we dare the audacity to petition God for fairness rather than faith, and we found congregations on purity rather than Grace.

Now when [those who had labored all day] came [to the landowner], they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received [only] the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled ...^v

During their courting and early married years, the Albrights all came to meet my grandmother, this new member of their clan, not necessarily because they were a family people who did such things, but because my grandmother was Catholic, and like the Fannin County Fair’s “Tattooed Man” and “Yak Lady,” they had never before seen one of those in the flesh.

After her husband died, my Roman Catholic grandmother, now a single mom to her two adolescent children still at home, became a realtor. And in 1965 – the same year Hurricane Betsy ravaged the Gulf Coast and Simon Broom of *The Yellow House* repaired and added to 4121 Wilson Avenue – Granny moved to a place on Regency Street in Monroe, Louisiana.

Of those first years on Regency Street, Granny told my Aunt Nancy, “Well, Nan, I was just so down and sad, so depressed. *I begged God not to let me lose my faith.* I prayed God to give me a little sign, ‘Just something, Lord, so that I know you’re there, and that I know I will be okay.’ And that is when God sent me my cross.”

If our technology will hold, here is a photograph of Granny’s cross. The sign appeared in a setting humbler than a manger – the ugliest aluminum-framed, “frosted-glass” window you or anyone has ever seen. In the photograph, you can just make out the window’s unattractive dimpling. You may also sense that this is an evening scene, for that was when Granny’s cross would appear.

Despite the intimacy of those nighttime hours and that space – the very small bathroom adjoining her bedroom – over the years, Granny would have her Catholic priests, her neighbors, her family, and her Bridge club come and bear witness to this miracle, her sign that God had not abandoned her despite the difficulty of those years ... God’s promise that she would be okay.

The grumbling laborers complained, ‘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.’^{vi}

Early in *The Yellow House*, Sarah M. Broom describes the “miracle” her family experienced in *their* bathroom. She recounts her brother Carl sharing that there was a “certain kind of window in there, when you look through you could see a cross way up in heaven, some kind of reflection ... I was scared of it,” he admitted.^{vii}

Sarah Broom continues, explaining, “The windowpane had a numinous quality that drew congregants from the Divine Mission of God[, the family’s church in those days,] who came to the house on Wilson, as if on pilgrimage ... They stood three or four at a time in the small bathroom, fitting themselves in among the towels and cleaning supplies ... [and] Dr. Martin[, their pastor,] proclaimed the window a sign from God, a blessing that had befallen 4121.

“But then the blessed sign began appearing in other houses too, becoming a small phenomenon, a miracle for ordinary people owning a certain brand of windowpane ... There was something in the material of the glass, it was eventually decided, that sunlight drew out. The manufacturers had used a new material. They were sorry for the hype and for Carl’s fear. You could call a certain 1-800 number for a replacement. *It just disappeared after they said that.* [And by its disappearance, the Brooms’ cross] retained its magic.”^{viii}

As I read the account of this “blessing,” my teeth nearly fell out of my head. Though Granny did not receive word of the 1-800 number circulating among those rebuilding in South Louisiana,^{ix} I have no doubt – the Brooms pressing into their bathroom and the Albrights pressing into ours – that the coincidence had a common cause ... whether a manufacturing defect or the Lord of heaven and earth.

The owner of the vineyard replied,] ‘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?’^x

Eventually, Granny would host a local artist and ask him to paint her cross. Here is that small oil painting, a little larger than a postcard. Spending so many of my growing-up years in her house, I paid Granny’s cross too little mind. In varying measures, my whole family looked at Granny’s cross with a rolled eye, and, in time, I would become an erudite Episcopalian – a person of a sophisticated faith – and this painting, which Granny prominently displayed, embarrassed me.

Lord, have mercy, I see it differently now. I am drawn to its textures and its colors – its chiaroscuro, if a painting so unassuming can bear such an arrogant word. Here, on the back, I especially admire the seriousness of the artist, his claim of copyright and his chosen title for the piece: “A Cross For Frances.”

Jesus’ parable challenges us and all who would justify *themselves*, for the momentum of Jesus’ life and ministry threatens the belittlers and the bullies, whether they attack by the passive-aggression of rolled eyes, or the outright-aggression of a Twitter account’s polemics.

See, the first laborers wanted only to spend time with people like themselves – fellow “earners” – and then to claim what was theirs ... but the landowner sought to honor the richer fellowship – whoever joined, whenever they got there – that he understood *was never his* but was always *God’s* possession, binding *everyone* in the vineyard, not by credential or tenure, but by Grace.

The first laborers wanted to distinguish themselves from those they deemed *lesser* – less hard-working, less learned, less sophisticated, less worthy – but the landowner blessed all those in the vineyard, binding them not by the polished particulars of any belief, but by the power of God’s Great Love.

Now Trinity Church, beware: beware, for we are in this vineyard! And in a year so soaked in public health, environmental, economic, and political *disaster*, the felt urgency of this moment is at work to hustle us – to hustle you – to tempt us into believing that we are the entitled laborers, reframing and refashioning the Body of Christ into nothing more than a benevolent non-profit institution, one bound by ideological purity and political party, by shared policy positions and a common indignation.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.^{”xi}

Realize that while those first laborers came to create a caste, solitary and self-righteous ... the landowner *aimed to build a church*. And in *this* vineyard, in *this* moment, God calls us to do nothing less: **God calls us to build a church**, receiving any who arrive, whenever they get here, and meeting them where they are, all with the same Grace and Love that God receives us.

That we would build such a home for our faith, I pray in the name of our generous God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 20:1.

ⁱⁱ As my Aunt Nancy recounted the story to me last week.

ⁱⁱⁱ My grandfather worked for International Harvester, a company that supplied farming equipment. His boss once commented, ““Clay Albright could sell a cream separator to a man that didn’t have a cow.” I wonder what role such powers of persuasion played in his courting of my grandmother.

^{iv} Matthew 10:5-8.

^v Matthew 10:10-11.

^{vi} Matthew 20:9-12.

^{vii} Broom, Sarah. *The Yellow House*. New York, Grove Press, 2019, p. 78.

^{viii} *Ibid*, pp. 78-79.

^{ix} As the crow flies, Monroe is 250ish miles to the north and west of New Orleans East. Taking I-55 south through Mississippi, it’s about a four-hour drive.

^x Matthew 20:14-15.

^{xi} Matthew 20:16.