Abstract
Because of their open-ended nature and subject matter relating to justice and mercy, parables are a disarming way of inviting students into dialogue about their own ethical views. By reading parables in light of the writings of Jon Sobrino students come to see how parables call readers to a particular set of responses to the most vulnerable. Parables like the rich man and Lazarus take on deeper meaning when paired with the insights of Sobrino on the complex inter-relationship between the poor and wealthy. This paper highlights the insights that emerge when we intentionally read parables through this particular lens.

Introduction
In 2016 Carlow University, a Sisters of Mercy school, introduced “Contemplation and Action” courses into the general education curriculum to introduce students to the Mercy charism and to lay a foundation for students to build on in their major courses as they consider matters of ethics and social responsibility in their chosen field. Required in the spring semester of the first year of studies, these courses can be offered in any liberal arts discipline. Regardless of the topic of the course, all courses include (in addition to the subject matter readings) a common set of readings related to the principle of mercy, an emphasis on the role of both contemplation and action in responding to the needs of the world, and a requirement that students identify a small act of service which they practice and reflect on daily. The present paper discusses a Contemplation and Action course on the parables of Jesus and how it is designed to provide an important foundation for promoting social action among students throughout their time in college and beyond. By virtue of their open-ended nature as well as their subject matter relating to issues of justice, fairness, and mercy, parables are a disarming and engaging way of inviting students into dialogue about their own ethical views, regardless of their religious background or lack thereof. By reading the parables alongside and in light of the writings of Jon Sobrino students can come to see where the parables call readers to a particular set of responses to the most vulnerable people. In conjunction with their small act of service outside of class, students begin to develop an awareness of the people in need around them in their daily lives. They also begin to gain an understanding of what it means that every person in need is their neighbor.

Specifically, this paper explores three parables used in the class which take on a new depth of meaning when paired with the insights of Jon Sobrino on the complex inter-relationship between the poor and the wealthy or the healthy and the suffering: the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-
31). I suggest that reading these three parables through this particular lens helps students, and can help all of us, to develop a nuanced view of mercy including the idea that the preferential option for the poor is not mere favoritism but rather an invitation to all people to participate in a restored humanity.

The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)

The parable of the Good Samaritan is the parable that is easiest to connect with the writings of Jon Sobrino since he devotes a full essay to it. Apart from Sobrino’s writing, this is certainly one of the best known of Jesus’s parables. Whether it is well known to today’s 18-year-old college students is another story. Well known or not, contemporary readings have to deal with a number of challenges right from the outset, before even getting to deeper questions of the nature of mercy.

We do not have time to address these challenges here but I will just acknowledge them briefly. First, the fact that the characters who pass by on the other side and do not show mercy are Jewish religious leaders, has given rise to anti-Jewish readings of the parable. This parable thus presents an opportunity to help students grapple with anti-Judaism and become aware of the subtle ways in which anti-Judaism has influenced biblical interpretation. A second issue is helping students to grasp the significance of a Samaritan in the Jewish culture of Jesus’s day. And here is an opportunity to explore with students their biases and preconceived ideas about groups of people with whom they have some natural, historical, or cultural enmity. In this parable, the hated person (the other) is the one who is the source of the suffering man’s salvation.

Getting past these challenges, Sobrino’s assessment of this parable is very simple: the Samaritan embodies mercy, which is the natural response to another human being who is suffering. Being moved internally and acting to alleviate that suffering is mercy. Mercy is “an activity of love” and “a re-action to someone else’s suffering, now interiorized within oneself.” We see this in the text of the parable where the Samaritan is “moved with pity” (v. 33). This reaction produces a result in action. The Samaritan did not take action because it was the right thing to do or because he wished to put his beliefs into action; he acted because he was moved with compassion at a fellow human who was suffering. Sobrino again: “Secondly, this activity,
in action, is motivated only by that suffering.” Sobrino explains, “The interiorized suffering of another is the first principle and foundation of the reaction of mercy.” To me, these are useful insights that help students come to grips with what mercy is.

Sobrino, however, goes a step further to derive from this parable what he calls the principle of mercy. This principle of mercy is what the Good Samaritan embodies:

By the principle of mercy, we understand here a specific love, which, while standing at the origin of a process, also remains present and active throughout the process, endowing it with a particular direction and shaping the various elements that compose it. We hold that this principle of mercy is the basic principle of the activity of God and Jesus, and therefore ought to be that of the activity of the church.

The Samaritan illustrates the principle of mercy in his initial act and in his ongoing efforts on behalf of the wounded man.

Sobrino has more insights to offer that illuminate this parable. He might suggest that, in addition to individuals being moved with compassion, systemic change was needed as well. Why are there robbers in the first place and what can be done to address the underlying causes of why the man was robbed and beaten? This raises the idea that there is anti-mercy at work in the world as well. Those working for liberation must not only promote mercy but actively resist anti-mercy.

There is much more that could be said about this parable. For purposes of the course, with this first parable students grapple with what mercy means and begin to articulate an understanding of mercy as more than just a feeling, and more than just a single kind act. It is a quintessential human response to the suffering of another; and it requires, among other things, seeing the suffering of the other. In short, the Good Samaritan shows us that, for Jesus, mercy is a characteristic of the ideal human being. The principle of mercy, then, involves a commitment to see, a commitment to feel, and a commitment to react to the suffering of another.

The Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16)

With the second parable we explore today, the Laborers in the Vineyard, we move in a different direction. Like the Good Samaritan, it is a parable that has given rise to anti-Jewish readings; it is also a parable that is easily spiritualized. So for first-year students it is another opportunity to learn how to read a parable as it would have been heard in the first century. When we peel away the anti-Jewish readings and some aspects of more traditional readings, there is a possibility to be confronted afresh with the challenge of this parable. Unlike the parable of the Good Samaritan, this parable does not speak to suffering directly, but rather raises very concrete issues of economic realities: wealthy landowners, day laborers, wage equity, and living wages under the larger umbrella of justice, fairness, and generosity. Though the details of the parable

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 19, 24.
are simple enough to understand, coming to grips with the specific message of this parable is tricky. How is it that the kingdom of God is like this?9

One common way of interpreting this parable is to spiritualize it. Parables, by their very nature, are a kind of comparison, using a concrete situation to describe something that is not so easily explained. This parable is thus not ultimately about a landowner and laborers and wages but rather about salvation. The landowner (God) hires laborers (invites followers) into his vineyard (the kingdom). Some come into the kingdom earlier, some later, but all receive the same full reward of a day’s wage (heaven). This might make some people grumble, but God is generous and God has every right to be generous. We all should welcome others into the kingdom at any time, just as God does. One common assumption in this approach is that those who were the first to be called represent the Jews, God’s chosen people who were chosen earlier in the history of salvation. The first hired claim to have born the burden of the day, which is commonly equated with bearing the burden of the Jewish Law. Those hired later in the day are, perhaps, the Gentiles who in the historical experience of salvation through Jesus are late to the game but still receive all the benefits of being part of the kingdom. The ones who grumble are thus the Jews who grumble at the fact that Gentiles have equal status in the kingdom as they do. A similar but slightly different interpretation is that those bearing the burden of the day are the Pharisees and those coming in late are the tax collectors and sinners. Those who live by the law grumble at the grace shown to those who have not worked for it like they have.

The trouble with these spiritualizing interpretations is that there is very little basis in the parable itself for such views. Three observations make the spiritual interpretation unlikely. To begin with, when Jesus first told the parable there were no Gentiles coming into the kingdom, so telling a parable with that point would have made no sense to his listeners; if that was his point, it would have gone right over their heads. Second, there is nothing in the text to suggest any kind of moral deficiency in those hired later; nothing to connect them to the “tax collectors and sinners” referred to elsewhere in the Gospels. Nothing in the parable suggests that they were sleeping in after a late night of revelry or were too lazy to get to the square first thing in the morning. When the landowner asks why they are not working, they simply reply that no one has hired them yet (v. 7). Third, as happens with the Good Samaritan, these kinds of interpretations reflect an implicit (or explicit) anti-Judaism, assuming that Jesus is using Judaism as a negative foil for a much more generous, grace-filled, and superior Christianity.10 Today more than ever, we must recognize and resist such readings. On the one hand they are a distortion of the reality of the first century when Jesus was teaching, and that has dangerous consequences. On the other

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9 Through his literary placement and explanatory comment, Matthew connects this parable with the notion that the first will be last, and the last first (cf. Matt 20:16, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last”). While we would not say that this is a mis-interpretation of the parable, it is the case that this short summary alone does not exhaust the ways in which this parable invites listeners to rethink their own values in light of the story.

10 Levine rightly points out that an anti-Jewish message is unlikely coming from Jesus to a Jewish audience: “Once Jewish Law becomes equated with ‘bearing the burden of the day and the scorching heat,’ we are no longer listening to the Jewish Jesus talking to fellow Jews. When Jewish practice or Jewish society becomes the negative foil to Jesus or the church, we do well to reread the parable.” Levine, Short Stories by Jesus, 228.
hand, if we do go down that path, then we are actually missing out on discovering the real challenge of the parable.\textsuperscript{11}

To be fair, the idea of a vineyard is used in Scripture as an image for the people of God and the kingdom of God (see Ps 78).\textsuperscript{12} In this sense it is not out of the question that this parable would point to spiritual realities about coming into the kingdom. But as Amy-Jill Levine asks, what if the parables are not only about salvation but are also about how people treat one another here and now? What if this parable is actually about economics, not eschatology: loving your neighbor, not achieving salvation? And this is where we can read this parable and find a real challenge: The kingdom is not just spiritual; it is grounded in economic and social realities. In fact, a more challenging spiritual meaning of the parable may actually be found precisely in the daily interactions of our lives and how they do or do not reflect the realities of the kingdom.

If that is the case here, then this parable draws on a social and economic reality in ancient Judaea and makes a point about the mercy of God as it plays out in daily work and wages. Through the dialogue it brings into focus issues of fairness and the economic systems that prevail. The landowner himself, who has the first and last word in the parable, raises the issues of justice and fairness when he says: “Whatever is just I will give you” (v. 4) and later, “Friend, I have done you no wrong… Are you envious because I am generous?” vv. 13, 15). One oddity of the parable is that the landowner defies expectations by paying more than was expected, but only to some. We may ask: is that a good thing or a bad thing?

One intriguing line of interpretation, which I will just mention but not elaborate on, is that the landowner was perhaps being very crafty in this approach. His tactic of paying the last hired a full day’s wage was a plan to sow division among the poor of Judaea so that they would not organize against him and so that he could continue his exploitive labor practices while he robbed the workers of Judaea with his cash crop grown for the benefit of himself and his Roman buyers.\textsuperscript{13} This approach is to be commended in that it attempts to give appropriate attention to the economic realities of day laborers and landowners in first century Judaea. However, there are good reasons to take the actions of the landowner as genuine and beneficent in this parable. By giving a full day’s wage to those who only worked part of the day, he enabled them to provide several days of food for their families. And it is in this vein that we can consider some more of Jon Sobrino’s writing.

With the realization that the parable is not only about eschatology but potentially also about economics, we can connect with an idea that Jon Sobrino has fostered: what he calls the “civilization of poverty,” a phrase he uses to draw a vivid contrast to the civilization of wealth which dominates the western capitalist world. The civilization of poverty rejects accumulation and the possession and enjoyment of wealth as the basis of humanization and replaces those with “universal satisfaction of basic needs” and makes “the growth of shared solidarity the basis of...

\textsuperscript{11} We can add another problem with such a reading: the impulse to move to an allegorical interpretation, where each item in the story symbolizes something else, actually misses out on the more challenging role of parables where it is usually the whole story which makes the point.

\textsuperscript{12} Further, the notion of the landowner as “lord of the vineyard” (v. 8) is at least suggestive of a divine comparison. See Levine, \textit{Short Stories by Jesus}, 227-229.

\textsuperscript{13} Levine discounts this approach. She writes, “These alternatives to the traditional view sometimes wind up reinscribing the same negative views of Judaism and the same positive view that Jesus was the only Jew who cared about justice.” For example, householder as a tyrant (representing the Jewish elite). Ibid., 218-220. Rather than addressing exploitation and abuse of workers in periods of extreme duress, instead, the parable is more likely about labor relations in a relatively prosperous period.
humanization." The principle of mercy, as discussed by Sobrino, is a fundamental characteristic of the civilization of poverty, as opposed to the closed and competitive individualism of the civilization of wealth. With this approach, Sobrino draws attention to the kind of spirit that informs a new civilization. In the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed, the new age, values like these would inform human interaction. It is this spirit of generosity, of shared solidarity, that the landowner in our parable perhaps shows: it is unexpected; it does not make sense in a competitive society; but it does allow everyone to work and have dignity while earning enough to support their families. Conversely, it is also this spirit that the grumbling and envious laborers struggle to embrace.

So our landowner, reflective of divine generosity, embodies the spirit of the kingdom, shared solidarity with his workers—which does not go over well with everyone. Levine gets at one dimension of solidarity without using the term when she writes, “Maybe the concern is to work within the localized system and provide, if resources allow, funds so that everyone has enough food.” Scripture is full of examples where God is generous to all; God’s children should reflect this quality too.

Since we spoke of Sobrino’s principle of mercy in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we may ask if the principle is at work in this particular parable. Is there mercy in this parable, as there was in the Good Samaritan? The term is not mentioned; and we are not presented with people in intense suffering. But if we work with an understanding that mercy involves a commitment to see, to feel, and to react, the landowner may indeed be acting with the principle of mercy. He certainly sees: “When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace” (v. 3). And in this seeing he seeks to understand and he also reacts. His reaction is not just to give them work, but also to give them a full day’s wage. Something moved him to do that. I suggest that it was not cunning but mercy.

At least in the context of my course, the Laborers in the Vineyard invites us to beware of anti-Jewish readings and of “spiritualized” readings, and to consider that the kingdom is not just spiritual. And it asks if we can conceive of a way of living and working together that is not based on competition but based on sharing of resources with one another. But rather than offer simple answers to how to move from “the way things are” to the way they are in the kingdom, students are left to wrestle with this, with no easy answers. In part, it is the wrestling with the parable that is the challenge of the parable.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31)

15 Ibid., 15.
16 And here, we may consider Gutiérrez’s discussions of the threefold aspect of liberation: social, personal, and liberation from sin. The grumbling perhaps suggests that liberation is certainly needed in the personal dimension for the kingdom to be enacted. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxviii.
17 Here we may note Sobrino’s observations the kingdom does not come into the anti-kingdom without some difficulty. The values of solidarity and being in this together don’t align well with the current order. Sobrino, Principle of Mercy, 19, 24. “When mercy is taken seriously as the first and last, it becomes conflictive” (24).
18 Levine, Short Stories by Jesus, 234.
19 Cf. also Sobrino’s notion of “unequals sharing equally.”
With this third parable, the Rich Man and Lazarus, we encounter one of the most memorable and elaborate of Jesus’s parables. It has a powerful hold on the Western imagination being alluded to by everyone from Shakespeare to Melville, and U2 to David Bowie (“Lazarus” was the last single David Bowie released before his death).\(^{20}\) It is also one that Jon Sobrino has drawn upon frequently to give texture to his understanding of the huge gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Noting the staggering numbers of people who live in poverty throughout the world, and the increasing gaps between the rich and the poor, Sobrino holds that ours “is a world of ‘Lazaruses’” and “these ‘Lazaruses’ coexist with ‘rich men.’”\(^{21}\) Sobrino connects the Rich Man and Lazarus with theories and methods of “development” and efforts to reduce poverty, that are driven by capitalist values and are not guided by the values of equality and brotherhood:

Whatever improvements are made in reducing poverty, I personally do not see what meaning they can have in a world where equality and brotherhood are not among the guiding values of development. They can have no meaning if they constantly reenact the parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Lazarus—without narrowing, only widening, the separation between them, as the UN Development Program (UNDP) reports every year.\(^{22}\)

So with this final parable we are challenged to consider the relationship of the poor and the wealthy and, especially, our own obligations to our brothers and sisters who are suffering.

The parable draws on a popular type of story about the fate of the rich and poor in the afterlife, with roots in Egyptian Jewish folk tales. As such, it describes an unnamed man of incredible wealth and an incredibly poor man, named Lazarus, who lay at the rich man’s gate. Jesus used this popular motif to challenge his listeners regarding their views of wealth, poverty, God’s favor, and their duties to the poor. While it may seem straightforward in its lesson, (i.e. that one’s responses to those in need in this life have eternal consequences) reading this parable with Sobrino’s insights about mercy opens up opportunities for more nuanced understanding.

Two things about this parable are particularly challenging. The first is the notion of the invisible poor. This concept takes us back to the good Samaritan who was willing to see and to be moved. The rich man apparently saw—Lazarus was there at his gate and could not help but be seen—but the rich man was unmoved.

Second, the gate itself has some significance. To begin with it is symbolic of the barrier between the two men in their earthly lives. It was a physical separation that represented multiple layers of division between the men. Similarly, in the afterlife, there is a great gulf; the barrier continues.

But there is an alternative; and the rich man at least realizes this, and he wants his brothers to be warned. In the dialogue we learn that the rich man himself could have acted differently; he could have listened to the prophets. By doing so he would not only have saved Lazarus from his poverty, but he would have received salvation from Lazarus as well.

Sobrino explains, “the option for the poor is not just a matter of giving to them, but of receiving from them.”\(^ {23}\) This is possible for Sobrino by identifying the poor with the suffering

\(^{20}\) David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 266.

\(^{21}\) Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 25.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 53.
servant of Isaiah. There are many parallels he draws out that can illumine this particular parable. Two of the gifts the suffering servant brings are light and salvation.

What exactly did Lazarus offer to the rich man? At least those two gifts, gifts which the rich man was unwilling to receive.

First, the poor offer the wealthy an invitation to see reality as it is. This is the light that the suffering servant brings: illumination. The presence of Lazarus at the gate testified daily to a reality that the rich man was unable, unwilling, or uninterested in facing. Lazarus could have helped the rich man deal with reality. The reality was that a son of Abraham was in a deeply dehumanizing situation.

Second, the poor offer the wealthy salvation in the form of an invitation to full humanity. As we saw with the parable of the good Samaritan, mercy and compassion are hallmarks of true humanity. Compassion is the natural human response to the suffering of another. Had the rich man had compassion on Lazarus, not only would Lazarus have been enabled to live in a more humane way, but the rich man would have been living into a fuller humanity than the insulated, closed, self-centered lifestyle in which he was fully immersed.

Sobrino explains more fully,

This response [i.e. co-responsibility] to the suffering of the poor is an ethical demand, but it is also a practice that is salvific for those who enter into solidarity with the poor. Those who do so often recover in their own life the deep meaning they thought they had lost; they recover their human dignity by becoming integrated into the pain and suffering of the poor. From the poor they receive, in a way they hardly expected, new eyes for seeing the ultimate truth of things.

In his preface to *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, Sobrino explains that he writes “in the hope that humanity will finally be healed, that there will be salvation for the poor, that we too will miraculously let ourselves be saved by them, and become truly a human family.” Day after day, Lazarus lay there offering light and salvation to the Rich Man. He did not care to see and did not care to be saved; to be humanized. Lazarus was in a horribly dehumanizing situation. By not seeing, and not caring, the Rich Man was also in a deeply dehumanizing situation, but one of his own choosing.

There are many other fascinating dimensions of this parable that we don’t have time to explore. These include the imagery of the parable (dogs licking the sores of Lazarus); the fact that Lazarus alone is named, not only in this but in all of the parables of Jesus; the frightful reversal and torment of the rich man; the refusal of father Abraham to grant any of the rich man’s three requests; and the shocking fact that the rich man never seems to change his tune, even in torment, but continues to see Lazarus as less than him, never acknowledging the suffering of Lazarus or his role in it. This parable also emphasizes the inseparable connection of Christian teaching with its Jewish beginnings; Jesus suggests that, if one will not listen to the law (Moses) and the prophets, the divinely given Torah and the challenging words of the prophets calling the people back to the ways of God, a miracle will not make a difference in changing hearts.

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25 In outlining the salvation which the “crucified peoples” bring Sobrino includes such things as values that are not offered elsewhere, hope, love, forgiveness, solidarity, and faith. Ibid., 55-56.
26 Ibid., 150-151.
27 Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, xii.
With students we can discuss the reality that the poor are invisible and what are the mechanisms that we use—the gates—that we hide behind to keep us from seeing reality. On a basic level, the challenge of this parable is for the rich to act on what they already know is right so that the poor can receive justice and the dignity that belongs to them as humans. On a deeper level, the challenge of this parable is the opportunity for the oppressors to receive forgiveness and be restored. Which brings us to the notion that the preferential option for the poor does not reinforce or create two opposing groups, but allows and invites both groups to a restored humanity. The poor need the wealthy to have mercy. The wealthy need to have mercy to be fully human.

Sobrino’s notions of solidarity and co-responsibility are useful here. He writes, “To be a human being is to be co-responsible with other human beings, and especially with the poorest.” Solidarity is an “unequal bearing one another mutually,” giving to each other the best of what they have to arrive at the ultimate goal of genuine “being with one another.” In each of these three parables, solidarity gets at the heart-level change that is needed to achieve the ideal outcome. From that spirit of solidarity and shared responsibility for one another as brothers and sisters, would come the actions of mercy that are so desperately needed. The “rich men” can be saved. They don’t need ghostly messengers to come back from the dead and warn them. They have not only biblical teaching; they also have the poor offering their gifts. The opportunity to see reality as it is. The opportunity to be moved to compassion at the suffering of another, and to respond. The opportunity to be part of a restored humanity in which solidarity is valued more than consumption.

Conclusion

With these three parables we have considered how they are a means of drawing students into reflection about their values and the values of the kingdom of God. The principle of mercy as outlined by Jon Sobrino sheds light on some important aspects of the parables. For the parable of the Good Samaritan, we consider that true humanity is a person who sees, feels, and responds to the suffering of another. For the Laborers in the Vineyard, we are reminded that the kingdom is not just spiritual but is (potentially) incarnated in the realities of our lives like working, paying wages, and being part of a social system. Justice and generosity are hallmarks of the kingdom, but we need to be liberated individually, communally, and structurally, for the kingdom to take root. Finally, the Rich Man and Lazarus invite us to consider the opportunity for all to participate in the restored humanity in the here and now. To be fully human, the rich must see the invisible poor, feel, and respond with compassion. They must accept the gifts of the poor.

The parables invite students into a different imaginal world and invite them to ponder issues of mercy, justice, generosity, fairness, solidarity, and their obligation to others. Rather than give students all the answers, parables entice them to consider what the kingdom of God is like, to see the world around them with new eyes and, hopefully, to respond to others in a truly human way, with compassion.

28 Ibid., 15-16.
29 Sobrino, Principle of Mercy, 169.
30 Sobrino, No Salvation Outside the Poor, 63-64.