Opinion

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Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard could be viewed as God's desire for all to be provided for on account of their need and not necessarily on account of their socially determined value or worth. Unsurprisingly, those who feel entitled to more cry foul and claim this practice is unfair. (Unsplash/Tim Mossholder)



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The acronym DEI, which stands for diversity, equity and inclusion, is a fairly recent turn of phrase that has been adopted by corporate, higher education, civil and religious institutions during the last decade. Often traced back to the U.S. Civil Rights era of the 1960s, especially the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, DEI has served as a shorthand for initiatives and programs that acknowledge historical disparities in opportunity, income and civil rights that negatively affected minority communities on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation and ability.

Individuals, communities and organizations committed to DEI principles have sought to correct such disparities and forms of disenfranchisement through education and policy development.

It is well known that in recent years the term DEI and those initiatives associated with it have come under attack, especially by right-wing activists who claim that such efforts disadvantage majority populations, particularly white men.

Since President Donald Trump returned to office in January 2025, his administration has sought to eliminate any efforts it classifies as DEI. These include federal programs and policies that seek to protect those discriminated against on the basis of race and sex, support equal opportunity initiatives, and preserve civil rights legislation.

Relatedly, the Trump administration has been ramping up efforts to root out what it calls "anti-Christian bias" in the government and society, a claim that is unsubstantiated. While sometimes addressed independently of its "war on woke" and attacks on DEI, there are also occasions in which the fight against DEI is presented as in keeping with Christian values.

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Some religious leaders and commentators have pushed back on the notion that the recent anti-DEI efforts are compatible with Christian values. Among them, Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons of the Interfaith Alliance wrote for MSNBC earlier this year about how these efforts to overturn DEI initiatives were in fact anti-Christian. And

journalist Jessica Washington showed in The Intercept how Trump's anti-"woke" executive actions have actually "launched DEI for white Christians."

I have been giving a lot of thought to these attacks on DEI. I would agree wholeheartedly with Graves-Fitzsimmons, Washington and others who rightly point out the irony and danger of attacking the most vulnerable and historically disadvantaged communities in our nation under the aegis of "religious freedom."

But I also think there is something far more striking to note. Regardless of how one feels about the specific acronym "DEI," what it represents as shorthand is reflected quite clearly in Christianity generally and the New Testament in particular.

Jesus' whole life of ministry and preaching was oriented toward announcing and enacting the values that have come to be called DEI in our own time. The proclamation of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God centers on celebrating the diversity of God's creation and among the human family, exhorting believers to embrace social equity as a form of divine justice, and announcing the divine reign as one of radical inclusion thanks to God's gratuitous love and mercy. That proclamation recognizes that some individuals and communities have been historically disadvantaged (e.g., orphans, widows, migrants, refugees, etc.) and are owed greater support.

When it comes to diversity, one only has to look at the way Jesus interacted with people from all walks of life. Despite social and religious conventions that discouraged or even forbade him from associating with those who were different from his own community, Jesus regularly traversed those unjust boundaries to be in relationship and solidarity with those different from himself, his family and his immediate circle of friends and followers.

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St. Paul goes further in the First Letter to the Corinthians to show the diversity of the community of believers and how difference is neither weakness nor problematic, but part of what it means to compose the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

In fact, Paul goes as far as to say, "Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect."

Not only does he preach the reality and goodness of diversity, but he also highlights what we might call equitable treatment on precisely these socially determined levels of honor and respect.

Regarding equity, we can see aspects of this theme throughout Jesus' parabolic preaching ministry. He constantly upends the socially and religiously normative views about who counts and who doesn't, who is deserving and who isn't, who God favors and who God doesn't.

One of my favorite parables is found in Matthew 20, when Jesus tells the story of the vineyard owner who hires workers throughout the day and in the end pays each a full day's wage. Some might look at this as an instance of "equality," wherein all are treated the same. The truth is that while all are paid the same amount, each shift of workers is treated differently according to the generosity of the vineyard owner (aka "God").

This parable could also be viewed as God's desire for all to be provided for on account of their need and not necessarily on account of their socially determined value or worth. Unsurprisingly, those who feel entitled to more cry foul and claim this practice is unfair.

We can also see Jesus' preaching of equity in terms of the final judgment and how each of our lives of Christian service will be evaluated. Note that in Matthew 25 Jesus does not list caring for one's own family or friends, prioritizing those "close to you" over others (pace Vice President JD Vance), or supporting those deemed "deserving."

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Instead, Jesus focuses divine attention, concern, love and mercy for the imprisoned, the sick, the hungry, the naked, the poor and the stranger. All of these are understood to be at the peripheries of society and generally seen as burdens or undeserving of care and support.

The converse is also true in Jesus' teaching: Not only are the poor and outcast given pride of place in God's reign, but the rich are admonished and warned that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). It certainly sounds like Jesus is on the side of those who have the most to lose in the domestic spending bill under consideration in Congress, rather than on the side of the wealthy and powerful who currently have the most to gain with its passage.

Finally, there is nothing more obviously Christian than working for greater inclusion in society (and the church). Whether it is Jesus praying to the Father that "all may be one" (John 17:21) or preaching a parable that invites literally everyone to a celebratory banquet (Matthew 22:9-10), whether it is the message of unity amid diversity as reflected in the famous passage in Galatians 3:28 or St. Paul's admonition to "live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:9-21), the value of inclusion is found consistently in Christian Scripture.

As Catholics, when we gather for Eucharist each Sunday, we celebrate the diversity of community brought together, not by our personal preferences or according to affinity groups, but by the Holy Spirit uniting all gathered in Christ. While we are not always faithful to Jesus' radical ministry of inclusion and table fellowship, the divine model and Christian call to be people of inclusion is found throughout Scripture and the tradition.

So regardless of what terms, letters or language one uses, whether DEI or something else, don't lose sight of what values they signify. Diversity, equity and inclusion are not anathema to Christian life and discipleship, they are found in the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Just as Jesus' radical ministry of announcing the kingdom of God drew the ire of the powerful and ultimately cost him his life, do not be surprised when proclamation and action on behalf of the same values by any other name elicits modern negative responses that seek to squash God's mission today.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.