

Proper 20 A Sermon  
Matthew 20:1-16  
September 24, 2023

*“The Opposite of Karma”*  
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*[And Jesus said:] "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."*

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Did you hear about the new restaurant that's opening in downtown? It's called Karma. There will be no menus because you'll be served exactly what you deserve!

If I was to summarize this one of Jesus' parables in a short phrase, I'd simply describe it as 'the opposite of karma.' What goes around, does not come around. The highly motivated day-laborers that started work at the crack of dawn and put in a grueling twelve hours in the heat and sun earned exactly the same as the slackers who showed up just an hour before quittin' time: one denarius—barely enough to feed their families for another day, with nothing leftover. Sure, they'd agreed to the wage at the start of the day, but that was before the landowner hired more workers at nine, noon, three, and five, before he ordered that the last to arrive be paid first, before he made a show of giving them a full day's wage, and before he proceeded to pay the dawn hires the same!

Understandably, I think, that first group felt miffed and they told the landowner so. I'm guessing that his response of "friend, it's my money so I can do as I like" would do little to assuage their feelings of resentment. But Jesus told his hearers that this is what the realm of heaven looks like. How does that strike you? Chances are, it doesn't sit particularly well with most of us. The landowner's actions fly in the face of the great protestant work ethic, so deeply engrained in most of us and challenge our very sense of justice. It simply isn't fair.

If you have children, particularly if you have more than one child, you've likely heard these words before. We're used to kids hollering out "no fair" or "it just isn't fair" when they feel slighted—when their sense of justice is challenged. My own mom used to count our presents to make sure we all had exactly the same number in order to avoid any unpleasantness on Christmas morning! Sound familiar? If we're honest with ourselves, it doesn't stop as we grow up.

When our work promotion goes to another person, or we get passed over for a job, or the big box store runs out of that on-sale item we were after,

or our taxes go up while another bracket's go down, or we're diagnosed with a debilitating illness, or we suffer an untimely loss we're likely to echo the children's words: it's just not fair. Mostly likely, it really isn't fair, because life, after all, really isn't fair.

That's probably why this parable is one of Jesus' less popular ones—because he teaches that the realm of heaven isn't fair either. The last will be first, and the first will be last. How does that make you feel? In a word: wronged. I'm guessing that most of us feel wronged.

When smacked in the face by the simple truth that life isn't actually fair, and apparently neither is the kingdom of heaven, we are faced with a choice: we can get frustrated or we can get over it. It sounds glib, but it really is that simple. We can come to be defined by the wrong that we've experienced, we can get lost in our own righteousness, get stuck in the past by the unfair thing that has happened to us, become paralyzed by the reality that what goes around doesn't always come around. Or, we can simply accept that life isn't fair, that we are not defined by our pain, that dwelling in the past keeps us from living in the present, that we can commit to making “a better future from the broken pieces of the past.”<sup>1</sup>

Life isn't fair. We will all have to do the difficult work of making peace with that. We will have to do the difficult work of grieving our personal experiences of that unfairness. And, we will all have to share in the work of making fairness a hallmark of our homes, our communities, and our nation. But, we are still faced with the simple truth that life itself isn't fair. In the context of Jesus' parable, I think that's actually meant to be good news.

There's absolutely no question that as a late afternoon hire, I would be overjoyed at receiving the same wage as those other dawn-to-dusk workers. The realm of heaven apparently isn't fair either and that's great

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Banschick M.D. “Fair is a Four Letter Word,” Psychologytoday.com, October 17, 2011:  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-intelligent-divorce/201110/fair-is-four-letter-word>.

news for the folks who started work late in the day. They didn't get what they deserved—they got so much more! The realm of heaven isn't fair, but for Jesus, the realm of heaven is “the world as God wants it to be, a world where everyone is treated the same, despite what they've contributed or have, where everyone is accorded the same dignity, respect, and reward.”<sup>2</sup> It's not a world where dignity, respect, and reward are accorded only to the ones that deserve them. It's a world where dignity, respect, and reward are accorded to everyone.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples a prayer that we repeat each and every time we gather together as church. In it, we pray for the coming of God's realm on earth as it is in heaven. Each week we pray for heaven's realm of dignity, respect, and reward for everyone—regardless of whether or not it's fair. It's probably best if we come to terms with the fact that life simply isn't fair and it's never going to be. Instead, as we pray for heaven's realm to come to earth, let's be busy building a world where dignity, respect, and reward are freely accorded to all. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose. “Not About Deserving,” Davidlose.net, September 14, 2020:  
<http://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-16-a-not-about-deserving/>.