

IT'S NOT FAIR
Matthew 20:1-16

Someone asks Jesus what the kingdom of God is like. You'd think that was a pretty safe, non-threatening question, right? Hoo-wee, are WE in for an answer that certainly WON'T be popular.

To begin, we need to admit something, if only to ourselves. Most of us, most Christians, that is, have a faith that is REALLY more akin to Buddhism in some respects than to the teaching of Jesus. If we're not careful we end up with a bit of Jesus, seasoned liberally with the "advice column" writing of Paul and topped with a healthy dose of Buddhism, among other things.

Think I'm wrong? Let's talk about Karma for a few minutes. You are familiar with Karma, right? The idea that what goes around comes around? I don't know about you, but I grew up with it: When something good happened to someone who obviously didn't deserve it, my day would say something like, "Don't worry about it. Things have a way of evening out in the end." And that made me feel better.

It was a fib, of course. I mean, sure we'd like to THINK that is the way the world works, but we know it's not. On a quick tangent, a respected Buddhist monk calculated the number of reincarnations that the average person would need to offset the negative karma of life today. Each time, coming back and doing a bit better...just over 6 million lifetimes. Six million! Maybe we should be glad that is doesn't work that way!

Yet we still cling to the notion that, somehow, everything balances out. The bad guy (or girl) gets their just desserts. The down-trodden hero will be blessed and the evil-doer will be cursed. Somehow, some way, everything works out so that life is fair. Right?

Is there anyone here who believes that life is fair?

Friends, life may be many things, but fair is not one of them.

Remember that simple question that started the sermon today? What is the kingdom of God like? Jesus answered, as He often did, with a parable.

Jesus told a parable about a landowner who went out about six in the morning to the

local coffee shop to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About nine o'clock he went back and did the same thing.

He returned to the coffee shop, OK, the marketplace about noon and repeated this procedure. Then again at three. Finally, about five o'clock--an hour before quitting time--he went back to the marketplace and hired one more round of workers.

At six o'clock, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

When the workers who began to work only an hour earlier came to be paid, they each received a denarius. Well, this delighted those who had been working since six that morning. "Think how much we're going to get," they thought to themselves.

But when their time came to be paid, they each received a denarius as well.

Matthew tells us there was more than just a little bit of grumbling in the vineyard that evening. What do you think they said? "It's not fair. We've labored all day in the hot sun and you've paid us the same thing that you've paid those who worked only an hour." And let's face it, he's right!

From here, let's pick up the story in Matthew's own words: "But [the landowner] answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'" "

Then Jesus added this cryptic phrase, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

If anybody but Jesus had said this, we would be up in arms. Most of us are confirmed capitalists. The people who worked all day ought to be paid more than the lazy miscreants who worked only an hour. That's only fair!

What's Jesus thinking about? Those workers are right to grumble. It's not fair!

And it's not fair. But here is the shocking Good News for today: God is not fair.

Mark that down. God. Is. Not. Fair. If fairness is the primary attribute you are looking for in God, then don't go to Jesus for instruction. In fact, if what we expect from God is fairness, we wouldn't need Jesus at all.

Are you awake now? In some churches what I'm going to say would be shocking. There are too many who attempt to bend the Gospel to fit their lives, rather than bend their lives to fit the Gospel...But I think you'll understand. This is the heart of the gospel.

For this to make sense, we have to start by recognizing that the Old Testament faith is all about fairness. The Jews would have used another word--justice! For the Hebrews, God, above all things, must be just. What does that mean in practical terms? One thing it means is that you can always determine what is right and what is wrong. The second thing it means is that if you are righteous you will be rewarded and if you are unrighteous you will be punished. What could be fairer than that?

There's only one problem: it doesn't work in the real world. Many good people suffer and many scoundrels prosper. The Old Testament man or woman expected to see God's justice prevail. The reward for righteousness was prosperity, a large family with lots of sons, good health, a long life. But then the best man in town gets struck with cancer. Well, maybe he has a sin that nobody knows about. There must be some just explanation...

Even as a nation, Israel believed it was rewarded when it was virtuous and punished when it was not. We read verses like Jeremiah 46:28, "Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, for I am with you," declares the LORD. "Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished." That's something to look forward to. "I'm going to punish you, but I'm not going to destroy you. Hey, I'm a nice Guy."

Is that a sufficient explanation for Israel's travails? What about the Holocaust? Six million Jews, many of them as good as any people on earth, murdered at the hands of a madman and his deluded followers. Where's the justice in that? No wonder many Jews have struggled with their faith.

But wait! You say. You are dealing only with life this side of the grave. Humanity survives the grave, right? Then, the righteous can go to heaven and the wicked can go to hell and burn forever, and all will be well with the world.

And for many people, this is enough. Ultimately God is fair. Hitler is in hell and Mother Teresa is in heaven, and everything works out as it should.

Then you're left with only one question. Where is the dividing line?

What are the sins that are worthy of hell? Murder? Theft? Adultery? A woman was recently tried for killing a man who raped her daughter. Would she qualify? How much do you have to steal to be headed for Satan's domain? The kid who breaks into your house and steals a few hundred dollars to support a drug habit. Is he a candidate for hell? But wait. What if he happens to be your kid? Then what? What about the company president who steals millions? But he's a deacon at the Baptist church! Does he get a pass just because he's a believer? Well, that's certainly not fair! Jesus said that a man who looked at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart. Is heaven only for women and a few virtuous men?

One problem with a faith based on fairness is that it is very difficult to apply.

And how do you keep some people who feel they are righteous from becoming self-righteous? Wouldn't there be the tendency, if you were among the spiritual elite, to look down on those who didn't measure up? I mean, hey, **I'M** doing things right, **I'VE** got my act together with this faith thing! This is what happened to the Pharisees, and it has often happened among those we might dub as super-Christians.

A minister friend of mine was describing a woman in his congregation when he called her a "scriptural machine gun". She could mow down persons who disagreed with her by quoting scripture and condemning them. "A-a-a-a-Thou shalt not kill. A-a-a-a-"Thou shalt not commit adultery." She could mow them down with her tongue, but she had no compassion, no empathy. She could only criticize and ostracize those who did not measure up to her high standards. And very few did. She was unhappy in the church because she was surrounded by all those sinners!

(Or maybe she was happy, because it gave her people to look down on...)

Some of us would find a special place in hell for the self-righteous, but would that be fair? After all, they are simply trying to apply as best they can the rule of law to their lives.

Do you see the problem? The people in Jesus' day certainly did. It would come up more than once in Paul's letters.

So Jesus tells this parable about people who have worked all day and they come to be paid and they're paid the same as those who have only worked one hour and those who have worked all day complain, "That's not fair. It's not just." And Jesus says to them, in effect, "God is not just; God is generous."

Here is what distinguishes the Christian faith from all others: God is a loving parent more concerned with seeing His children redeemed than seeing them punished.

How often does the loving parent hear her children complain, "That's not fair!" when seeking to fashion an appropriate response to a particular situation? And sometimes, from a strictly objective standpoint, what you are doing is not fair. But sometimes you have to remember that fairness is not your objective. Raising healthy, responsible children is your objective.

So it is with God. God is a righteous God, but justice is not God's primary concern. God is not interested in balancing our virtues and our vices and meting out punishment accordingly. God is interested in fashioning souls who can live with Him for all eternity.

That is what the cross is all about. The old system of offering sacrifices for sin, even sins we may not be aware of, to an angry and vengeful God is done away with forever. Christ has borne all our sins upon the tree. This is why his passion and death were so horrific. He who knew no sin bore the sins of every person who has ever lived--your sin and my sin--on the cross of Calvary. If you want to recognize what's not fair, THAT'S not fair! We ought to pay our own way. But that's what happened. Jesus paid it all.

And it's not fair for another reason. It's unequal. Repentant murderers, thieves and adulterers receive the same absolution as Sunday School teachers and martyrs, but there it is. It's all done. The slate is wiped clean.

Never again will anyone ever have to avoid God because of his or her unworthiness. And never again will anyone deserve to feel superior to anyone else. We may not be equals in the boardroom or on the athletic field, but at the foot of the cross we are all sinners saved by grace, not borne down by karma.

Sadly, that is the way it is with those who depend on their own righteousness, or even God's justice to make everything work out "fair" or "just". God is not just; God is generous. Come to Him now. You are perfect in God's eyes just as you are because of what Christ has done in your behalf. Come to Christ. His arms are open for you today.