

“Karma, Dharma, Pudding and Pie”

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Book of Matthew chapter 20, verses 1-16

The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers 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 labourers 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.’

Philip Appleman, “Karma, Dharma, Pudding and Pie”

O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,
gimme a break before I die:
grant me wisdom, will, & wit,
purity, probity, pluck & grit.
Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind,
gimme great abs & a steel-trap mind,
and forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice -
these little blessings would suffice
to beget an earthly paradise:
make the bad people good -
and the good people nice;
and before our world goes over the brink,
teach the believers how to think.

Sermon

“Make the bad people good, and the good people nice.” Philip Appleman’s poem holds a great truth about humanity. Not just that we want to eat our pudding and have great abs, too. He says, for this world to become an earthly paradise, “Make the bad people good and the good people nice.”

In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the landowner hires workers at the beginning of the day. Then, strangely enough, he goes back to the market-place and sees the people who had not yet been hired that day, and gives them work as well. He does this again and again, giving jobs to those who still need them. When

the time comes to pay his workers, first he pays the ones he hired towards the end of the day. He gives them a full day's wages even though they only worked a few hours. So naturally the people who worked a full day think "This is great, he'll give us even more than the normal full-day's wages." But then the landowner ends up paying everyone the same amount, regardless of how much they worked. The people who worked a full day complain, but the landowner chastises them for being angry at his generosity.

If you have a WASPy work ethic like I do, you might be thinking: hey, that is SO not fair! We didn't mean the good people should be that nice. Where is the logic in the landowner's decision? Where is the justice? What about equal pay for equal work? Scholar Anthony Robinson wrote in the *The Christian Century*,

Often called "the parable of the workers in the vineyard", [this story] might better be described as "the parable of the generous landowner". It would be difficult to imagine a parable that is at once more disturbing and yet more relevant to our lives and society. It offends our sense of justice and fair play. It puts a finger, none to gingerly, on that most common human experience—the sense that others have gotten more than their due and that we have not received what we deserve...

If we find ourselves identifying with the first-hired workers who "have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat", that is probably as Jesus and Matthew intended. We think of all the times we arrived early and stayed late, all the committees we have served on, all the wash we have done, all the work we have undertaken, and we say, "It's not fair!"

[But] are we really like the all-day workers? Or are we the inheritors of gift and grace,...of mercy and blessing that are not strictly correlated to our efforts and virtues, and are far greater and wilder than we imagine or deserve? Is it possible that from God's perspective, we've all shown up at 5 p.m.? The point is not that fair play and justice do not matter. The point is to gain a fresh view of

the world in which...grace, gratitude and graciousness are [central to] the equation."

"Make the bad people good and the good people nice." I think we can say that no one in this parable is bad. Even the workers who were hired later in the day were ready to go, want to work, want to earn their way. They weren't lazy bums. Perhaps they hadn't been hired yet from the marketplace because they were disabled, or sick, or got there late after taking care of their children. Many of us are willing to work, want to do our fair share, want to use our skills and support our household, and yet remain unemployed. These workers were hired, it seems, less because the landowner actually needed their help and more because he wanted to give them an opportunity to work. He didn't want to give them a handout, he wanted to give them an opportunity to earn a living. They want to work, so he hires them. They are all good people. But then the landowner goes and acts nice. And that's when the good people start to get annoyed. It's not fair!

But like Anthony Robinson said, this story is not telling us that justice doesn't matter. Rather, what this story lifts up for me is the distinction between human concepts of justice, and the divine possibility of love. Reinhold Niebuhr, who is arguably the most important theologian and ethicist of the modern era, called love "the impossible possibility." If we lived in a state of divine love in a world where all are good, and also nice—then everyone would have enough to eat, a roof, a friend. Our love would be boundless. We would share freely and happily. We would use only what we needed and give all the rest to someone else who needed it. And yet, human beings have not been able to create such a utopia. So, to keep ourselves even modestly in line, we have created a human construction of what we think divine love could look like, which we call justice. In the terms of justice, we give each worker their due, but no more. We give those who are unemployed, or unable to earn a living a very small compensation, but no more. We have a system of consequences and privileges. With justice, we

approximate in our human way a shadow version of what a world ruled by love could look like. Our version is good, but not nice. There is fairness, but not so much forgiveness.

Niebuhr called love “the impossible possibility” because he believed that human beings could most likely never attain a culture of love over a culture of justice. Justice, he thought, was the best we could do, and even that we didn’t do quite well enough. Niebuhr’s view of human justice versus divine love gave his theology the label of “Christian Realism.” In other words, Niebuhr was saying, we are having a hard enough time making the bad people good. We have no chance of making the good people nice. Niebuhr was a realist, but he also had a dream. The paradox of the impossible possibility meant that Niebuhr was always hoping that some day, some far-off day, human beings would be able to discard the workings of justice for the grace of love. Reaching the impossible possibility was, to use a metaphor from George Herbert, like being an archer who aimed at the moon. Your arrow would never hit the moon-but it would go higher than if you aimed at a tree.¹ Of the story of the laborers in the vineyard, Niebuhr wrote eloquently:

Here ... truth transcends human wisdom and speaks to us as the foolishness of God which is wiser than the wisdom of men. Yet we are able to accept this foolishness as wisdom if we have probed deeply enough into life to discredit the little systems of wisdom which have pretended to exhaust its mysteries. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of law. Forgiveness is the highest justice and the end of justice. ... The householder of the Parable of the Vineyard specifically rejects the calculations of justice.

In this story, the landowner is seen as God. We can say God, or perhaps, if it sparks your imagination and spiritual taste buds more, we can say the landowner is the Spirit of Love, the Creator and Sustainer of the Beloved Community. And what the landowner

knows is that everyone falls short of that full-day’s work. None of us work as hard as we could at being good, and at being nice. And yet, we are still recognized by this mysterious universal force not by our failings, but by our human worth. We are measured not by our skills or our talents or our bank accounts or our physical ability, but by our inherent worth and dignity, our spark of the divine that rests within, no matter whether we are good, bad, or nice.

Niebuhr’s Christian Realism still drives us today. We want to be good-and we want others to be good to us. So we pay our taxes so that our roads and schools get taken care of. We stop at stoplights so that we don’t get hit by other cars, or hit them. We sit on juries, we write our congresspeople, we work for justice. And most people think that is as good as we can get.

Maybe it is. But justice can be self-serving. We speak of Justice, with a capital J, and yet our justice system is sorely lacking. Our political system prosecutes people of color more harshly for the same crimes white people do; our system uses our taxes to pay for its wars; our system manages to maintain the status quo with discrimination, prejudice, and power. When we call ourselves Just, we do not challenge ourselves to try harder, go further, love more. When we call ourselves Just, we do not ask for forgiveness, or radical change. Many times, when we call for justice, what we really want is justice for ourselves. We want what we think is our due. We want others to get what we think is their due.

There’s a story about Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, which is a ministry to the poor. She shows how we might behave when our motive is love rather than just what is fair.

One day a woman came in and donated a diamond ring to the Worker. We all wondered what Dorothy would do with it. She could have one of us take it down to a diamond exchange and sell it. It would certainly fetch a month’s worth of beans. That afternoon, Dorothy gave the diamond ring to an old woman who

lived alone and often came to us for meals. “That ring would have paid her rent for the better part of a year,” someone protested. Dorothy replied that the woman had her dignity; she could sell it if she liked and spend the money for rent, a trip to the Bahamas, or keep the ring to admire. “Do you suppose God created diamonds only for the rich?”²

Dorothy Day took the example of the metaphorical landowner and lived it in her own life. Her actions may not seem fair to someone who worked and saved and bought a diamond ring, in the same way that the laborers who worked a full-day grumbled about everyone getting equal pay. But the landowner-and Day-saw the world not through the eyes of “justice” but through the eyes of love. The landowner did not see a poor person who only deserved a few hours’ wages. Day did not see a poor woman who only deserved a free meal. What the landowner saw was a human being who deserved respect, and care, and the same grace and generosity as all the rest of his workers. Dorothy Day saw a human being who deserved the same gift of beauty, and respect, and love that any human being might wish for. They acted with love. Maybe it wasn’t fair. Maybe it was foolish. But as Niebuhr said:

Here ... truth transcends human wisdom and speaks to us as the foolishness of God which is wiser than the wisdom of men...Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of law.

For Niebuhr, this love was an impossible possibility. Even Dorothy Day saw the enormity of the task she was taking on. When she died, the Catholic Worker continued to do its ministry for the poor. The writer Parker Palmer asked a friend there how it was that she could “keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better. ...[She said] ‘The thing you don’t understand, Parker, is that just because something is impossible doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it!’”³

So it is my hope that when I get bogged down worrying about the treatment I deserve, and the treatment someone else does not deserve, that I remember to shoot for love, and not for justice—for forgiveness, not fairness—to try for the moon, in the hopes that I may reach the treetops. One Unitarian Universalist minister described this reaching beyond justice, towards love, in a way that applies to our lives and our congregations. She wrote:

There comes a time in every life when we think, “How will I take care of myself?”

Eventually, that question turns to, “Who will take care of others who cannot take care of themselves? How can I help to do that?”

When this transition happens, we’ve achieved some kind of moral accountability with the world. You could say, in old-fashioned language, we have got religion.

In Unitarian Universalism, we often hear, “How will I get my needs met? If this- or-such happens, will I still be welcome?”

When we finally reach the day when we can all say together, “How can I help my congregation be a place that can better minister to those who might need us?” then I believe we will have lived into the vocation of our religion.⁴

I know we try to be good. But let us try also to be nice. May we give of ourselves not just what is fair, but what is generous. May we try to practice divine love, the impossible possibility, and in so doing, at least achieve real justice. And may we always remember, to love thy neighbor-and thy Niebuhr. Amen.

1 George Herbert, The Country Pastor.

2 Day, Selected Writings. Ellsburg, in Spiritual Literacy, page 352

3 Spiritual Literacy, 352

4 <http://peacebang.blogspot.com/2006/06/when-it-happens-if-it-happens.html>