

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

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Saint Mark's, Penn Yan

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What do we deserve?

I feel fortunate this morning. Many parables require a great deal of context about the world of Judea and Rome in Jesus's time before you access the emotional resonance of a story. But your rector was kind enough to give me a parable with an emotional center we can all understand. As a millennial, I would freely describe this story as a relatable feel.

The fact is, we have all been there at some point or another. We work hard. And someone else does not. Somehow or another, they get the same reward as us. They don't get what we think that they deserve. It hurts. We don't get what we think that we deserve: more than them. It hurts. All we want to do is to find a landowner to grumble to.

My day job is a professor. And, Lord knows, I have plenty of stories of students who have felt like they did not get what they deserved and grumbled against me like we read in this story.

But I myself am not immune to these feelings. I think about myself at age 17. I applied to many universities for undergrad. One of them that I applied to offered me a scholarship, based in part on need and in part on merit. Great, thought I, I worked hard for this. I did my part, and, in the end, I got what I deserved.

Then, I got a phone call. Because of updated financial documents my family had submitted from the previous year, they were taking my scholarship away. I was angry. After all, the main change in my family's financial situation had resulted from the death of my grandpa, who left some money to my dad. How was it fair that the university was taking money away from me just because my grandpa died? Other children with live grandparents presumably got the scholarship. I, now with three dead ones, had it taken away. What did I do to deserve this?

I don't remember exactly how I reacted to the person on the phone. I'm sure I felt like I should grumble. But, instead, I could imagine myself, being a good Minnesotan, saying something bland like "Oh, golly," and hanging up as quickly as I could. We'll come back to that story later.

Let's turn now to the gospel reading from today. This parable comes to us at an interesting time in Jesus's ministry. Jesus is about to turn towards Jerusalem to end His teaching. He is about to experience something that He knows He doesn't deserve.

But, rather than complaining, or even giving us a nice, hearty "uff da", Jesus is doing something quite different. Jesus is having a moment. He has just told his disciples that abandoning your family is something that will be rewarded. So much for family values. On top of that, He has told His followers that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. This is profoundly countercultural even today. That is especially true because it flips on its head the idea of what it means to "deserve" something. Haven't the rich worked hard to get there? Don't they deserve it? "No," is the clear answer that Jesus gives us. Instead, Jesus says sort of

the opposite. He ends his previous parable with, “the last will be first and the first last”. These words are echoed again today.

In today’s parable, we see a strange story. Instead of telling us to sit comfortably with our feelings, the ones that tell us that we get what we deserve, Jesus flips that on its head. A landowner tries to hire workers for his vineyard four times, all throughout the day. Each time, he promises to give them “whatever is right” as a reward. At the end of the day, starting with the folks who joined the landowner last, everyone is given the same wage: one denarius.

Grumbling inevitably ensues. Relatably, the men who labored all day feel like they deserve more than those who did not. But Jesus suggests that that idea is a dangerous one. The landowner chides the earlycomers, asking, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Repeating the end of the immediately preceding chapter, Jesus asserts once more: “the last will be first, and the first last”.

Let’s go back to my anecdote from earlier. I felt like I should have received the scholarship that I won before it was taken away. But did I “deserve” it?

My dad’s parents moved with him and his older brother in the 1950s to one of a stretch of suburbs of Detroit known as “the Pointes”. All of them have “Grosse Pointe” in their name. If you’re familiar with the 1997 film *Grosse Pointe Blank*, it was set at my dad’s high school.

From the mid-1940s until about 1960, buying a house in the Pointes was subject to a Point(e) system. (Eh? Eh? See what they did there?)

Unbeknownst to them, people who were seeking to buy a house in the Pointes were tailed by a private detective. The private detective would fill out a form and send it to real estate agents in the Pointes to determine whether the family looking to buy a house deserved to purchase it. The form would include questions like, “are the husband’s immediate associates typical?” and “does the family have a swarthy, slightly swarthy, or not at all swarthy appearance?” Different answers were given different points. If you were WASPs like my family, you only needed 50 points to be allowed to buy the house. If you were Italian, you needed 75 points. Jewish? 85, and there was a supplementary screening just for you. Black and Asian families were not ever acceptable. This was not a formal, legal requirement, but an enforced aspect of the business of buying and selling houses. If a realtor sold to a buyer who did not earn enough points, they were no longer eligible to do business with other Grosse Pointe realtors. But, the market was lucrative. And so agents in the Pointes gladly submitted to the system.

The realtors of the Pointes made it clear who they thought deserved to be in their community. And they succeeded: the towns of the Pointes were deeply segregated for years. Even after the Pointe system ended, redlining and exclusionary norms kept the town uniformly white. Most of the Black people who lived in the Pointes until the 1980s were live-in domestic servants. The first Black family to move into Grosse Pointe proper, in 1966, had to have white friends purchase a house and then sell it directly to the family. This occurred even as Detroit itself, literally on the border of the Pointes, became predominantly Black. This accomplished the purpose of the Pointe system: keeping property values high by keeping certain people out. The Pointes have always had some of the highest property values in the area. When my grandpa died, his main asset was his home, the

sale of which was split between my dad and uncle. My family directly profited from the Pointe system and its consequences.

Now, I know how hard I worked in high school. I know what my grades were. I know what my standardized test scores were. By the standards of the community I was raised in, I was a good kid with a bright future. But what I didn't reckon with at the time was the privilege that got me the breathing room to allow me to immerse myself entirely into my studies. I didn't deserve to have money taken away from me because my grandpa died. But I also did nothing to deserve my good fortune for happening to have been born into a family that encouraged me to go to college and was able to give me the support I needed to do so.

The parable we hear in today's Gospel reading does not give us much context for the laborers working in this vineyard besides a timetable. Some show up at nine o' clock. Others are idling at five o' clock. But we don't know anything about the rest of the days of each group of workers. We don't know why some can make it out at nine and others at five. We don't know what those five o' clock workers have done already with their day.

Our society teaches us that, for much of what we do, one person may deserve something more than another person. In the Pointes, this was expressed most heinously as the Pointe system. What today's Gospel reading makes clear is that such a notion has no place in God's kingdom.

The landowner is a bad capitalist. But that seems to be exactly the message. In this parable, Jesus argues against trying to understand the love of God in corporate terms. Instead, we see a different paradigm. God's love, God's mercy, God's charity, God's grace – all are given to all. Equally. The last will be first, and the first last. Jesus says that everyone deserves the profits of the kingdom.

It is unlikely, based on what I know of your rector, that any of you will start instituting Penn Yan's first point system for new arrivals. You know which side you would be on in Grosse Pointe. But we all could reconsider our relationship with the idea of "deserving" something. Regardless of what methods you use in your work or school, God says that in God's kingdom, the rules are different.

We need to consider the idea that everyone in this story, even the early arrivals, were given exactly what they deserved. The same reward, God's love, given to everyone, the same as everyone else. When we reflect on the things that allowed us to wake up early and make it to the marketplace with enough time to be idle at nine in the morning, we might reassess our relationship with the idea of "deserving" more than the others around us. Once we do that, we may find ourselves choosing to go last, so that we can watch those who went last go first. And we can watch them with joy to receive exactly what they, and we, deserve.