

# Getting What We Deserve

[Matthew 20:1-16]

"The way of the Lord is not just...?"

K Karpen, Sunday, September 18, 2005  
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

[Matthew 20:1-16, "Getting What We Deserve," K Karpen, September 18, 2005]

Last night we hosted President Chavez of Venezuela in this room. It was a bit of a holy mess. Many more people came than could fit, even in this big space. The secret service and the Venezuelan security were slow and careful in screening people coming into the building. And although once it got going, it was a wonderful and inspiring event, it started late.

We were all mingling around in here before it began, and a minister I know slightly came up to me. "Pastor," he said, "I need to know where the VIP section is." I thought he was kidding. I said, "I've got a good seat in the balcony; you can come sit with me." He walked away.

I turned to Jim Ring who was ushering nearby. "I guess everybody's a VIP," I said. He laughed and said, "Yeah, I guess so." But it occurred to me that that was true, in a profound sense. Everybody in the room, everybody outside still waiting to come in, everybody who'd given up and gone out for pizza. Everybody else. Everybody. Everybody is a very important person in the eyes of God. We forget that.

Oh, we know it intellectually. We know it scripturally. "God is no respecter of persons," quoth the King James version. Which always sounds odd until you realize it means almost the opposite of what it sounds like it means. God is no respecter of particular persons. God is no respecter of very important persons. Because, in God's eyes, that's exactly what we all are.

God must have a good laugh over our celebrity culture. Someone came up to me once at a fancy fundraiser up at Columbia and said, "Aren't you somebody?" And I said, "Yeah! I'm K Karpen!" But that was clearly not the sort of somebody she had hoped I was. God must laugh.

And God must have a good cry over our culture of class, where those who have a lot receive a lot more and believe they deserve it. And those who have nothing have nothing, and we think they deserve it. God help us. Because God is no respecter of persons.

We're pretty sure, when good things come our way, we deserve them; and maybe we do. We're pretty sure that what we receive we earn, by our merits, our diligence, our hard work, our great value; and maybe we do. But God is no respecter of persons.

When John D. Rockefeller was questioned about his wealth, he responded a bit defensively, "God gave me my money." Maybe he couldn't come up with any other

[Matthew 20:1-16, "Getting What We Deserve," K Karpen, September 18, 2005]

way he could have ended up with so much. And although in the end it made him a generous person, it also gave him a strange sense of himself.

\*\*\*

Jesus is not addressing matters of class directly in today's parable, but he is challenging our ideas of providence and merit. The parable is a simple one, really. A guy hires workers for his vineyard. Some work all day. Some work a half-day. Some work an hour. All get paid for a full day's work. And the only people who complain are the people who get what they deserve. Oh, Jesus; you're being ironic, aren't you.

The only people to complain are those who actually get exactly what they deserve. Exactly what they've been told they'd get. They work a full day. They get paid for a full day. They should be happy. They're not. Why? Because somebody else got the same, and they deserve it less.

Like us, their sense of the worth of what they have is relative and not absolute—not related to what they require. But not in God's book. That's not the way God does it. Does that make God some kind of communist? No. But it doesn't make God much of a capitalist either.

Hurricane Katrina exposed some of the harsh realities of our economic and political system. We are all taking a fresh look at the vagueness of that system, in the harsh after-light of Katrina. That, as Bishop Park put it the other day, "Those who had the least had to suffer the most."

We're not quite the country we've imagined ourselves to be. We're not quite the country we've imagined ourselves to be. We've got some sadly misplaced national priorities. But maybe we could be. Maybe we could be a place where the basic needs of life—food, clothing, shelter, medical care—are distributed in some way approaching fairness. Where we all get not what we "deserve," but what we need to get through the day.

That's God's way. And though it may never be our way, God asks us to try. Because God wants us to have what we need, despite what we deserve. Because in God's eyes, we are all very, very important persons. I will sing Hallelujah, I will sing, O Lord,

[Matthew 20:1-16, "Getting What We Deserve," K Karpen, September 18, 2005]

I will sing Hallelujah, O Lord!

For you are the source of my supply, Lord, I pray,

I lift you high. Sing Hallelujah, O Lord.

(God's given me) God has given me hills and mountains,

(God's given me) God has given me level plains,

(God's given me) God has given me food and clothing,

God's given me shelter from the storm and rain.