



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## God Isn't Fair

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 21, 2014  
The fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 20:1-16*

Jesus was many things—teacher, friend, advocate, savior, healer—but businessman? Not so much. Even I, a liberal arts guy through and through who just plays a businessman a good portion of every day, know that this highly provocative parable of Jesus is about something much bigger than a new radical business model.

That may come as a bit of a disappointment to any knee-jerk liberals within my hearing. I should admit that on an occasion or two, I have been saddled with such a label, often accepted without much shame and maybe once or twice with a little smugness. On first reading, this parable seems to be the perfect story for people so inclined, a particular gift from God to shore up one side of a political argument. Only overt, rarely used circumspection and a little dose of personal honesty keep me from attempting to use this passage as a direct commentary on anything in the world that seems to me to be disordered or unjust. The truth is this story deserves more than ten minutes of political grandstanding.

To be clear, I believe that Jesus actually told this story. For those of you who care about such things, the Jesus Seminar scholars are almost of one mind that these are authentic, red letter words of Jesus, a designation in their work as scarce as hens' teeth. Additionally and more importantly to me, I believe that Jesus fully realized the politically and economically charged manner in which his story would be heard. And, yet, I don't agree with Reza Aslan's assertion that Jesus was a Zealot, that he was a member of an organized political and military party designed to overthrow those in power. But he was mad, literally as mad as hell, about the poverty and harshness of life that surrounded him and his people. Jesus, who in my view of Christology foretold and bore witness to the cosmic-Christ, the one who was, is and shall be in the world, was, despite such universality, a very local guy. Claiming that of Jesus—his local orientation, his awareness of and willingness to engage the reality around him—could be the inspiration for many a sermon. Loving those around is a prerequisite to being able to love beyond us. He cared about, loved in fact, the people right around him—those in pain and sickness and those who lived desperate lives in abject poverty. This story shows Jesus' awareness of a reality that still exists—day laborers standing at commercial crossroads around the world, hoping to be chosen to be among those who get to work for whatever amount. It was a denarius they sought in this story, an amount believed to be just enough for one day of livelihood.

At a busy intersection on Staten Island near where I once served, very early in the morning men, almost all men and almost all brown men, gather, waiting for the line of SUV's and pick-ups that like clockwork begin to arrive. It happens quickly and without much visible negotiation; but if the right eye contact is made, the lucky guy hops into or onto the vehicle that has slowed before him and goes off to work, probably for not much more than a denarius. By mid-morning, only a discouraged few remain, their faces showing the truth that now their hope must wait for another day. Jesus' story never failed to come to mind when I'd witness this sight.

And, yet, to be honest, this story, like so many others of Jesus, is filled with hyperbole and exaggeration—all to make a point. Jesus said in the beginning of the story, "The kingdom of heaven is like this." He knew full well that the kingdom on earth was **not**. But before we rush back into the safety and satisfaction of a system that works extremely well for many of us and seems to be supported by many even for whom it does not work well, Jesus also emphatically said again and again: "The kingdom of heaven is here and it is now." He never said that it is some far, far away place of reward that awaits us, his message clear that we who follow him are to bring it about. Imagining what makes God mad is both ridiculous and usually self-serving—God always seems to be

enraged at the same things that enrage me. But if I were to engage in such an absurd process, I'd imagine that God gets furious when he hears us say, "Well, yes, these are terrible circumstances here on earth, but it will be all milk and honey for **everyone** once we get to heaven. The least among us should just hold on, and, by God, someday it will be great for them too." Nothing about Jesus' life suggested any such thing. He talked about better lives right now! And if in our practice of religion we have lost sight of that, then we are missing the point.

The parable stings because it reminds us that we know what is right and what is wrong. Of course there are grey areas, but we don't really struggle with whether or not it is right for many people to be held from the opportunity of having reasonable lives, while a tiny number of people have more wealth than most of us can even imagine. We don't really believe that exceptionalism is acceptable as the only way for some to break out of cycles of institutional poverty and despair. The word negates its wide use: exceptional means deviation from the norm, from what would be normally expected. We cannot say with a straight face that the great success of one extraordinary young man or woman from a particular group is fair argument that any can make it if only he or she try hard enough.

So what are we to do? Feel guilty about it? God, deliver us from that. Guilt has become such a comfortable and impotent cliché in my own life and in that of others that it makes me almost actively ill. Often reeking of political correctness (which though better than political incorrectness is only slightly so), it satisfies our desires to **feel** something when we don't want to **do** anything.

This radical story calls us to change, to view the world in a fundamentally different way. Yes, of course we are to be good decent people who uphold the rights of all human beings, admitting the good luck of our birth and its privileges, as we seek goodness and fairness in the world. But this story is much more far-reaching than that; in fact, I believe Jesus told this story to question everything we believe about God.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, God is likened to the old father, who sat in anxious anticipation of the day that his younger son, a mess of a human being, might come home. This younger son had behaved so badly that at most he should have been able to hope for decency from his father, perhaps a chance to start over. Instead he was received with arms thrown wide open, tears of joy, and the grandest party his father could arrange to welcome him home—this one who was lost but was now found. Most of us strongly identify with the older brother, who had always done right. Even when we try to be generous of spirit, our sense of fairness, the orthodoxy of fairness, is offended; and it stings.

Today's parable shocks us in the same way. In our failed attempts to understand God, we rely upon what we know—using our concepts about life to form what we think about God. It's perfectly natural, human; but the best news in the world is that God operates independently and much more expansively than our hearts can imagine. I can't tell you how thankful I am that God is not fair. Granted, fairness may be the best we can hope for in our own creating and managing; but stories like these call us to something deeper and better in ourselves, one small conversion at a time, taking us closer to the heart of God. Is it a political story? Sure, in some sense it is; as I have said, we know what's right and what isn't. But mostly this is a story about the nature of God and the possibility that we can become just a bit more like God. If we were to dare to believe what it tells us about God, it could turn our lives upside down; and there'd be no telling what we might be able to do.

In the name of God: *Amen*.