

9.20.20

Why Generosity is Better than Fairness

Matthew 20.1-16

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I want to begin by asking you a question. How do you feel when you're the recipient or the beneficiary of generosity? How do you respond when someone does something generous for you? Are you sad, disappointed, surprised, grateful, happy? I think most of us would say it's very nice to be on the receiving end of generosity. How about when you do something generous for someone else? How do you feel when you give in a way that blesses, helps, encourages, or eases the stress someone else is experiencing? Does it make you feel good, thankful that you're able to do so, is it gratifying? I think most of us would say it is fun to be able to give in a way that honors and gives joy to God and blesses other people. Would you agree that it's great to be on the receiving end of generosity and it's also fun to be generous and experience the blessing of giving? The reason why I ask these questions is today's gospel from Matthew 20 is about the generosity of God in the kingdom of heaven.

““For **the kingdom of heaven** is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, *'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'* So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 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?'* 7 They said to him, *'Because no one has hired us.'* He said to them, *'You also go into the vineyard.'* 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, *'Call the laborers and give them their pay, **beginning with the last and then going to the first.***' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.'* 13 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? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

A lot of us are offended by this story. It challenges our sense of justice. It's not fair! Perhaps it seems like poor labor relations. Who would want to work for an owner who treats his employees so unfairly? Can you imagine laboring for 12 hours in the scorching heat while others work for just a few hours once it has cooled off - and they're paid the same as us! To make matters worse, this parable isn't about economics, it's about the kingdom of heaven. If anybody needs to be fair, right, and just it's God. If this is God's way of doing things it seems wrong.

Have you ever gone to the supermarket when there was only 1 or 2 open checkout lines? Have you ever been in a checkout line that you were sure would melt your ice cream before you got within sight of the cashier? The people in front of you all appear to be making their once a year trip to the grocery store to buy food. They have several loaded carts, coupled together like freight cars. Others who don't have tons of food have crying children. No line would be complete without the person who gets to the register and is shocked to discover the store isn't giving away the food for free and only then do they begin searching for whatever form of payment they choose to use. While you're waiting in this line, a miracle happens. A cashier walks into the next aisle and says, "*May I help someone?*" With the skill of a NASCAR driver you pull your cart out of the traffic and roar into the open register, thanking God for answered prayer. *Unless* you happen to be the second person in the long line who believes she should go next because she has been waiting the longest. That is typical of us isn't it?

If we're last, we want undeserved generosity if we're second, we want fairness. Generally, we want things to be fair *especially* if we think we've been slighted. We believe we work hard and try to do the right thing, yet we struggle while others less honest and less faithful than ourselves seem to prosper. Ultimately, since life isn't fair, we want God to be fair and to straighten out all the injustices we witness, if not here, then in heaven. We hope Jesus isn't saying God is like this landowner, who intentionally

offends the early workers by making them wait in line to see the last workers receive the same pay for 1 hour of work as they get for 12. Or is he?

It's important to note the first workers got exactly what they agreed to work for (the usual daily wage), but they still get mad and grumble. A wise man once said, *"If only we wanted to be happy it would be easy; but we want to be happier than other people, which is almost always difficult, since we think them happier than they are."* When others work less and get the same reward, we feel sorry for ourselves and complain that life isn't fair. Most of us, including myself, believe that material rewards should be scaled to effort and results. But often if we're not careful our identity can be wrapped up in rewards we can compare - like grades, our job, salaries, houses, cars, degrees, titles. **We may find ourselves measuring the fairness of God by comparing what we receive with what our neighbors get, instead of by whether God keeps his word to us.**

We demand fairness when we think we deserve more. I never heard of anyone demanding fairness that didn't think if he got it, he would *gain*. We rarely consider the possibility that if God was fair with everyone in the world, we might have considerably *less* than we do. More often we assume that if God is good, God will be fair, and if God is fair, then *we'll* come out ahead because *we* deserve more.

This is because so many of us relate to the 6:00 and 9:00 a.m. workers. We assume we're most like those who have worked the hardest and the longest and deserve more for our efforts. Fewer of us probably identified ourselves with the five o'clock workers who benefited from an act of generosity and grace. However we may need to consider the possibility we have deceived ourselves about our own goodness and what we deserve.

The Barna research group did a study on religion on America and they found people believed that Christians were the same as other people except for two things - Christians go to church and they're more judgmental. Our first response is, *"They're wrong! I am not!"* Our tendency to judge others is revealed in our perception of the 5 o'clock workers. Often, we believe the 5 p.m. workers are lazy, don't want to work, and just want to milk the system. But Jesus is clear - the workers have been standing idle all

day, not because they didn't want to work, but because no one has hired them. There are no jobs. Some of you know what it is like to want to work but to get laid off or to be unable to find a job, especially in this pandemic.

Imagine you're one of those 5 p.m. workers at 4:30 p.m. in the marketplace. Have you spent the day anxiously worrying about the job you need to get? How do you feel about yourself? How are you going to pay the rent? What is your spouse going to say when you come home without any money or food? Then this landowner gives you one hour of work. At 6 o'clock, it's pay time. You expect fairness and a pittance for pay and you're stunned to receive a full day's pay for your brief effort. Are you shocked by the landowner's generosity? How do you feel about the landowner's generosity toward you? If we've been blessed by generosity that ignored merit or achievement, we know what it is like to be touched by amazing grace.

Most commentaries or study Bibles call this the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. That's unfortunate. It isn't about the workers, it's about the landowner. It should be known as **The Parable of the Generous Landowner**. Consider the landowner for a moment. He's actively involved in his vineyard. He could sleep late, but he doesn't. He's in the marketplace, hiring workers at 6 o'clock in the morning. The vineyard owner provides a place for service, money for daily bread, protection from harm, and he actively seeks out laborers. He is compassionate; his heart goes out to the folks who can't get a job and who will be faced with going home at the end of the day with no money to buy food and no satisfaction of a job well done. The landowner is doing all he can to empty the marketplace and fill the vineyard.

When evening comes, the landowner claims the right to pay the workers not based on their merits but because of his own generosity. When the early workers grumble against him and give him the evil eye, the landowner rightly asks why his generosity should be condemned as injustice. The landowner cheated no one and everyone received at least as much as was promised or could be fairly expected or more.

Jesus revealed in the generous mercy and compassion of God. Those of us who worship God are to imitate the Lord's generosity, not begrudge it. Can we see other

people not as competitors for limited rewards but as companions in the vineyard? The early workers could have thanked the landowner for hiring more workers throughout the day which certainly would have alleviated the pressure on them to harvest the crop while it was ripe.

Imagine living our lives in such a way that instead of grumbling against God and our neighbors we could rejoice with our neighbor's good fortune and thank God for providing for their needs as well as our own.

Thomas Long says that the parable invites us to consider the question, "*Which is real, the grasping competitive world in which we live every day, or the world of generosity created by the parable.*"¹ Sometimes even members of the church can forget that the church exists for the benefit of those who are not yet members and that we're to be generous as God is generous to us.

Matthew places this parable in the context of a discussion between Jesus and the disciples about rewards and grace. Like some of us, the apostles want to know what their reward will be for the things they've sacrificed to follow Jesus. Peter says straight up to Jesus in **Matthew 19:27**, "**Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?**" Jesus' answer concludes with the words (19.30), "*But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" Jesus is reminding us that God will honor any sacrifices by his followers, but the reward will so far surpass our sacrifice that it can only be seen as an outright gift.

Many years ago the late Rev. Bishop Covell and I had the privilege of going to visit a woman at a local nursing home who wished to be baptized by immersion by a Baptist pastor before she died. We were told time was of the essence. She was in no condition to be baptized by immersion and we spoke with her and explained that immersion was not necessary for salvation that it is the intention of our heart and not the mode of baptism that is of ultimate importance. I read to her Paul's words about baptism from Roman's 6 and then Jesus' words to the thief on the cross who was welcomed into paradise without being baptized at all. Bishop then took water and asked

¹ Thomas Long, *Preaching and The Literary Forms of the Bible*, page 101.

her if she believed in Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior and she replied that she did, and Bishop baptized her with a little water. She visibly relaxed and looked at peace. Before we left, her son and the nursing home aide thanked us so much for coming. She died half an hour after we left, welcomed joyfully into God's vineyard.

At times, we may feel, perhaps like Peter and the earliest followers of Christ, that our long and costly service qualifies us for a higher rate of pay in God's heavenly vineyard, but we're to remember that none of us deserves the glorious future God has prepared for us. Rather we're to imitate the generous spirit of God in our lives.

Listen to another parable, this one by Anthony De Mello. "Jesus began to teach in parables. He said: The kingdom of God is like two brothers who were called by God to give up all they had and serve humanity. The older responded to the call generously, though he had to wrench his heart from his family and the girl he loved and dreamed of marrying. He eventually went off to a distant land where he spent himself in the service of the poorest of the poor. A persecution arose in that country and he was arrested, falsely accused, tortured, and put to death. And the Lord said to him, *"Well done good and faithful servant! You gave me a **thousand talents** worth of service. I shall now give you a billion, billion talents' worth of reward. Enter into the joy of your Lord!"*

The younger boy's response was less than generous. He decided to ignore it and to go ahead and marry the girl he loved. He enjoyed a happy married life, his business prospered, and he became rich and famous. Occasionally he would give alms to the poor. And when it was his turn to die, the Lord said to him, *"Well done good and faithful servant! You have given me **ten talents**' worth of service. I shall now give you a billion, billion talents' worth of reward. Enter into the joy of your Lord!"*

The older brother was surprised when he heard that his brother was to get the same reward as he. **And he was pleased.** He said, ***'Lord, knowing this as I do, if I were to be born and live my life again, I would still do exactly what I did for you.'***² Each of us chooses whether we will be grumblers like the early workers, or generous souls like the owner of the vineyard. Let us not be envious because God is generous.

² Anthony DeMello, "Good News" from, *Song of the Bird*, pages, 117-118.

Let us celebrate the generosity of God, who rewards us, and our neighbors, far, far, far beyond what we deserve.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If you're comfortable doing so, share a story of an act of generosity that someone did for you that touched your life. It might involve a gift of time, money, caring, food, or encouragement.
2. Jesus says just before the parable in Matthew 19:30, "*But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" Immediately after the parable in Matthew 20:16 Jesus says, "*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*" How does Jesus teaching about the kingdom of heaven reflect an inversion or reversal of the world's standards? What does that imply for us?
3. Why do you think Jesus' has the Landowner in the parable pay the last workers first in full view of the workers who have been there all day? Keep in mind this is a parable about the Kingdom of heaven and not economics.
4. Do you agree that generosity is better than fairness? Why or why not?
5. How does this story about the generosity of God, impact your view of generosity both in terms of sharing the good news of Christ as well as sharing all that God has blessed you with materially?
6. In the coming week how can you 1. Do good and forget it. 2. Be generous. and 3. Share?