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Offensive Generosity
Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Matthew 20:1-16

How do you feel 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's fun to be able to give in a way that 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. Listen to a parable of Jesus that's found in *Matthew 20:1-16*.

“For **the kingdom of heaven is like** a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers 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 marketplace; 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 laborers 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 is your eye evil because I am good?"
So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Some people 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 worked for just a few hours once it has cooled off – and they're paid the same as we are? 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 were only two 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? While you're waiting in 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're the second person in the long line, who believes she should go next because she has been waiting the longest. That's human nature, 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 that God is like this landowner, who offends the early workers by making them wait in line to see the last workers receive the same pay for one hour of work as they get for twelve. Or is he?

It's important to note that the first workers got exactly what they agreed to work for (the usual daily wage), but they still got mad and grumbled. A wise man (French philosopher and political thinker, Charles de Montesquieu) 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 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, jobs, 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 only 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 many of us relate to the 6:00 a.m. 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 5:00 p.m. workers, who benefited from an act of great generosity and grace. However, we may need to consider the possibility that we've deceived ourselves about our own goodness and what we deserve.

Our tendency to judge others is revealed in our perception of the 5:00 p.m. workers. Some people may think – even though it's not communicated in the scripture – that the 5:00 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 and to be unable to find a satisfactory job.

Imagine you're one of those 5:00 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? Have you given up hope? Then, this landowner gives you one hour of work. At 6:00 p.m., 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.

Many commentaries or study Bibles call this The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. However, it really is **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 6:00 a.m. The landowner 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 out 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.

I titled this message **Offensive Generosity** because of the double meaning that phrase implies. The early workers found the landowner's generosity offensive because they thought they deserved more than others who worked less, even though they received exactly what they agreed to. There is another way to think of **Offensive Generosity**, and that's in the positive sense of generosity that takes the initiative to bless, help, and encourage others. This is the generosity of God, Jesus, and the Kingdom of heaven, that we – as Christ followers, and the church – are called to demonstrate. Jesus reveled in, and shared, 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 had a totally different attitude toward the owner continuing to hire more workers. They could have been thankful because hiring more workers throughout the day would have made their job easier and easier, and 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 a 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, *“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matthew 19:30)*. 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 that 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 *Romans 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 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 a half an hour after we left, welcomed joyfully into God’s vineyard.

At times, some of us 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 that God has prepared for us. Rather, we’re to imitate the generous spirit of God in our lives.

I pray you will think about how you can be an instrument of God’s Offensive Generosity – offensive in the sense of bringing God’s love, grace, and mercy to people

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

and places where our resources are needed, and can make a difference. Today, we begin receiving the World Mission Offering, which supports the work of our Global Servants and partners around the Globe – people like Dr. Bill and Ann Clemmer, and Jon and Amanda Good, and many others. We're also getting closer to our Holiday Fair, which helps people right here on Cape Cod. Both are needed, and both are opportunities to imitate and share the generosity of God. Friday night, our Student Ministry held a movie night to raise money to provide Grace Grants to our graduating high school seniors next June, which raised over \$700, and is being matched by a donor.

Each of us chooses whether we'll be grumblers, like the early workers, or generous souls, like the landowner, who keeps returning, searching, inviting, and providing for others. Let's not be envious, nor have an evil eye, because God is generous. Let's celebrate the generosity of God, who rewards us and our neighbors, far, far, far beyond what we deserve.

Prayer by Benjamin Cremer

Lord Jesus,
 Forgive us for the times we have viewed others through the lens of scarcity instead of the lens of love.
 Forgive us for the moments when we have been quicker to question whether someone deserves help than to rejoice that their burden has been eased.
 Forgive us for the ways fear has shaped our imagination more than your generosity.
 Open our eyes to see your abundance.
 Teach us to celebrate when others receive what they need.
 Teach us to rejoice when the hungry are fed, when the stranger is welcomed, when the poor are cared for, and when those who have been overlooked are brought into the vineyard. Free us from resentment. Free us from comparison.
 Free us from the myth that compassion is a limited resource.
 Give us hearts that reflect your generosity.
 May we become people who open our hands rather than close them.
 People who rejoice in the flourishing of our neighbors.
 People who trust that your Kingdom is abundant enough for everyone.
 And may we remember that we, too, are recipients of grace we did not earn.
 Help us to extend that same grace to others.
 In the name of the generous householder who never stops seeking those left behind,
 Amen.

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 about 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?