

September 18, 2005
Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16
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“When God Isn’t Fair”

Jesus did not have the good fortune to be educated in a Presbyterian Seminary, so he apparently didn’t learn the necessity of a three point sermon. Instead, he told stories that had one main point. So, I’d like to invite you to think about this passage from the Gospel of Matthew. As we read it ... as you hear it ... what do you think is the one main point? Listen now to the Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16.

Did you get the point? Can we truly grasp the point of what Jesus is teaching his disciples? Actually, I believe it’s the same truth that is emphasized in the Old Testament reading we heard. I could probably ingratiate myself to many of you this morning if I’d just give a concise statement of that truth, and proceed to the closing hymn; but I’m not going to make it that easy!

Instead, I’d like to tell a story from my own experience. It comes from over 30 years ago, when Glenda and I were still newlyweds. We were living with her parents for the summer before I entered my graduate study. I found that I could earn good money by joining the Teamster’s Union and working as a casual laborer out of the Union Hall. That meant that each morning I would sign in at the Union Hall, and wait for a call to come in for some work on a loading dock in Cedar Rapids, or nearby. Some days there were no calls, but most mornings I would be sent to work loading or unloading trucks. And when I did work, the pay was great! (\$3.31 per hour, and time and a half for overtime). So I was very grateful for every day I was sent to a job. The Union contract at the time required that a union member would be paid for a minimum of eight hours any day he worked.

One day in particular stands out in my mind. I received a call almost as soon as I arrived at the Union Hall to go to Iowa City and unload a couple of 48 foot trailers, along with one other guy. It was one of those hot, hazy and humid days with forecasts in the 90’s, and the sun beating on that trailer would create a very hot sauna as a working environment for that day! But I was exuberant as I drove to the job, just knowing (thanks to Jimmy Hoffa!) that I had at least eight hours pay coming before sundown!

As we started the unloading, we realized this job was more complicated than most jobs like this. There were different sizes and shapes of cartons that had to be stacked on heavy wooden pallets in a very tight jigsaw puzzle arrangement so a forklift could drive into the trailer from the loading dock, pick up the pallet and haul it away. And the cartons were quite heavy as well. Both my partner and I just saw this as an interesting challenge, forced us to employ a bit of thinking on this job, and neither of us minded that! Even as the temperatures rose to blast furnace levels toward mid-day, we worked steadily, drank lots of water and made good progress... even took pride in the neatly knit pallet loads we would stack for the forklift to take away.

Just after lunch, the dock foreman came to us and said we were doing good work, but because these two trailer loads had to be done by quitting time he had already called the Union Hall for another man to come and help us get it done. We told him that sounded good to us. We could use an extra hand!

Sure enough, around 2 p.m. our guy arrived. The new man was a foul-mouthed, lazy, obnoxious guy who told us he didn't usually take loading jobs ... he preferred driving! For the next three hours he proceeded to regale us with filthy stories, expressed his opinion on every topic he could think of and generally got in the way of our work.

By five o'clock though, we had finished the job and our supervisor had our checks prepared for that day's work. Only then did it hit me: This profane, lazy little man was getting exactly the same pay I was getting for that day of work! He had only been on the job for about three hours, half of which were his "break times," but the rules were that he would be paid for eight hours!

I must confess: I did not drive home that evening with the same sense of grateful relief I usually enjoyed! What was usually a celebration of God's provision of another day's work at a generous rate of pay, had turned into a cloud of discontent about how unfair things are in this world.

I was not in a frame of mind at the end of that particular day to accept the one central point of this story Jesus tells of the laborers invited to work in the vineyard!

Let's be honest: don't we each feel some resentment when we look around us and see those much less deserving than ourselves reaping the same rewards and benefits in life that we feel we earn by honest work? It's not fair!

When we see evil running rampant in this world ... greedy and unscrupulous people coming out on top. When we see the virtues and values of our own nation attacked in shocking and hateful ways, we can't help but think, sometimes, "If I were God, I would not allow these things to happen!" God ought to be more fair!

So, what is that one main point in this parable? If we grasp what it is, it will no doubt shock us. I think it is this: God always reserves the right to be outrageously generous. Period.

It is the very nature of God to be generous ... to be gracious. If we learn anything from the life and death of Christ, it is that God is never content to be merely fair. It is the very nature of God to give generously ... beyond what we—or others—deserve.

The grave risk we are warned against here is falling into the trap of entitlement ... imagining we deserve all that we are given. How seductive it is to begin to believe that all of the abundance we enjoy is pretty much our own doing:

- As though we had invented the gifts of life and intelligence!
- As though the blessings of family, a free country, and a good education and good health were the result of our own worthiness.

- As though the bounty of the earth were the product of our striving!

When we become so arrogant that we believe we deserve all this, then we lose sight of God completely. And we begin to think of our time, our abilities, our opportunities and our possessions as though they belonged to us!

The truth Jesus would teach us is that it all comes from God: God who acts like the prodigal father, who threw a party for the wayward son who came back home. God who acts like a devoted shepherd who goes out in search of the one that strayed away.

God is not merely fair. God insists on being outrageously generous. [That's the point.]

But... since I was the recipient of a Protestant Seminary education (way back in the 20th Century!), I feel compelled to share three affirmations that arise from the truth of this parable:

I. It all comes from God. Everything worth having in life is a gift from God. This simple Truth is basic to everything else Jesus taught. If we reserve the right to cling to our time and our abilities and our possessions as though they belong to us and not to God, then we cut ourselves off from at the very beginnings of growing in our relationship to God.

But, if we acknowledge that it all comes from God, then we can open our hands to receive these gifts, and we can begin to grow into the kind of generous disciples Jesus calls us to be. So, rather than asking the absurd question: "What do I have to give to God?" The real question becomes, "What am I doing with all that God has given me?" It all comes from God.

II. It's not about rewards, it's about relationships. The long history of religious practice is mostly about offering gifts or sacrifices to the gods in order to get some favor or blessing in return. But Jesus gives us a completely different way of living.

God's gifts are given, he says, to everyone simply because God is a giving God. But we are then invited into partnership with God ... which we do by giving! So we're not making our offerings to God to get something we want ... we give our time, our possessions, our best efforts as a means of growing closer in our relationship with God!

Can you see it almost as a sacred dance, in which we—with open hands—receive God's good gifts. Then, with hands upraised we offer our thanks to God, acknowledging the goodness of God. Then, in partnership with God, we offer what we have been given to confer God's blessing and hope and transformation of life to those around us.

III. What we are doing with what God has given us is a measure of our own spiritual maturity. This is the inescapable truth Jesus emphasized in much of his teaching, and in the life he lived. If we would follow the path he took, we will discover not only that giving is a means of growth into the likeness of Christ; but also that giving of ourselves and our possessions is one of the most important measures of our faithfulness! It is a sobering question for all of us ... as a congregation of faithful people who have been given so much: as individuals who have such a rich variety of talents and abilities, are we growing in our faithfulness as it is expressed in our giving?

A LITTLE PERSPECTIVE ...

If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all the existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look something like the following:

57 Asians
21 Europeans
14 from the Western Hemisphere, both north and south
8 Africans

52 would be female - 48 would be male

70 would be nonwhite - 30 would be white
70 would be non-Christian - 30 would be Christian
89 would be heterosexual - 11 would be homosexual

6 people would possess 59% of the world's wealth and
All 6 would be from the United States.

80 would live in substandard housing
70 would be unable to read
50 would suffer from malnutrition

1 would be near death;
1 would be near birth
1 (yes, only 1) would have a college education
1 would own a computer