

The Stewardship of Generosity

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
September 24, 2017
Matthew 20:1-16

The day after I turned 16, I got on my bike and pedaled furiously to my local McDonalds, where I applied for a job and was hired on the spot. As much as one can remember, it was a positive experience. I mostly worked the grill. My managers were reasonable, my co-workers were amiable, I learned some structure and discipline and was paid, if I remember correctly, \$2.35 an hour.

So imagine this...I show up for my shift, in my navy blue polyester shirt and pants, my paper cap, prepared to make Big Macs and Filet-O-Fish and Happy Meals. I work hard. About halfway through the shift, my manager Dave introduces a new co-worker. No interview. No training. He just gets to work. Then later, as I am watching the clock, counting the minutes until I can punch out, another new person shows up. Same story.

Finally, the shift is over. I am ready to punch out, head home, and perhaps even spend a little of my hard-earned money on whatever 16-year-olds spent their money on back then. Manager Dave calls us together and gives us our paychecks. We open them, as people do, and compare. All three, the same. Exactly the same. What the heck, I think to myself! I worked harder, longer. And no disrespect to the other two (although when you say no disrespect, you really mean “no respect”), but I worked better. Yet the pay – exactly the same. How unfair is that. I go to Dave to complain, but he will hear nothing of it. We paid you what you were owed, what you earned. I hop on my bike – I can’t afford a car on \$2.35 an hour – and pedal away, furious, at the unfairness of it all.

That is the parable we’ve just heard from Matthew’s gospel. Let’s hear its conclusion again:

“And when they received it (their pay), 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 are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

We continue to unpack, in our Year of Stewardship, what stewardship is. One working definition is “our grateful response to God’s graciousness.” Another might be “caring for all that God gives us.” As we continue to explore what stewardship is, a baseline premise is that we respond to God’s activity. God acts first, graciously, lovingly, and we nurture and cultivate that action in how we live our lives and share that gift. Another way to say it – punctuated by this pointed parable of Jesus – is that because God is generous, we are generous.

We often associate generosity only with money. Generosity includes money, to be sure, and one of the reasons that we are having a year-long conversation about stewardship is that we can’t afford *not* to talk about money. So financial generosity, absolutely, that meets you where you are and stretches you, at whatever level and whatever capacity.

Yet this parable is only tangentially about money. Money is the symptom, but not the root of the first worker’s problem. Like stewardship, generosity is about money, and so much more.

I recently read an interview of Robert Redford. He reflected back on his early career, before he was rich and famous, just another young actor trying to make it in Hollywood. “I’ve been very fortunate in that I’ve had wonderful relationships with people I’ve worked with. But nothing has sustained like Paul Newman. Nothing has sustained like our connection. It went into movie friendship, into personal friendship. It cut very deep. He agreed to have me in the movie (“Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid”) that I should not have been in. He was that generous. The studio wanted others. He wanted me. They didn’t pay me anything – I almost had to pay my way into that movie. But that generosity really struck me hard, that he could be that generous and have that kind of integrity. And then the film went on, and we both pushed aside our movie personas and just became friends. It turned into a longtime friendship that still exists, even though he’s not with us anymore. I think about him. And I will always be grateful for his generosity.”

Generosity of money. Generosity of time. Generosity of relationship. Generosity of attitude. All beginning with God’s generosity toward us.

We are in the Jewish holiday season. I remembered a Jewish prayer. “Dayeinu.” It means “enough.” It would have been enough.

Last week at 9:30, we were discussing God’s gifts – one person said it was a gift just to get up this morning. It would have been enough. Dayeinu.

Here’s a bit of the prayer...

“If God had brought us out from Egypt, and had not carried out judgments against them. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

If God had split the sea for us, and had not taken us through it on dry land. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

If God had taken us through the sea on dry land, and had not drowned our oppressors in it. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

If God had drowned our oppressors in it, and had not supplied our needs in the desert for forty years. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

If God had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years, and had not fed us the manna. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

If God had brought us before Mount Sinai, and had not given us the Torah. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

If God had given us the Torah, and had not brought us into the land of Israel. Dayeinu, it would have been enough!

You get the point. It would have been enough. We deserve none of this, none of it. That God is generous at all, let alone that God is generous in abundance, well that is almost too much for us to handle.

If God allowed me to ride my bike to McDonalds for the interview and I didn't get the job, that would have been enough.

If I got paid for a long shift, and another got paid for a short shift, that would have been enough.

My friend Jill Duffield, who serves as the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, writes about this parable, focusing especially on that moment when the owner asks the worker "are you envious because I am generous."

Jill writes: "Yes, I am. If I am being honest, I am envious because God is generous. Even though I have been given everything I have been promised, much of which I do not deserve, I am envious when I perceive that someone else is getting what could (should?) have been mine. What's most dangerous in this scenario is how much I think should be mine. I easily justify what I deserve and just as readily calculate how undeserving others are."

Jill continues: "But here is the thing: This parable isn't about idleness. It really is not about the laborers, the ones who go to work early or the ones who go at the end of the day. We often make it about those things because those are the things about which we obsess. We care deeply about fairness. More accurately, we care deeply about perceived fairness toward us. We spend an inordinate amount of time sizing up whether or not people are deserving, worthy and appropriately appreciative. We devote lots of time and energy into assessing measurable results and the impact of our "generosity." When we hear this story, most of us assume we're the ones at the front of the line - the ones who went to fields early, worked diligently all day

and got our agreed upon wage and then felt stiffed when those idle ones came late and got the same payment we did.”

Jill asks: “But what if we imagined that we were the ones who got there last and got paid first? What response does that flipped script elicit? Imagine you were among the last people chosen to go to the field.”

Now, I ask you the final question: Are you envious of the landowner's generosity ... or are you grateful for it?

Jill concludes: “No matter how you interpret this parable, we are the ones who get way more than we deserve. More than was promised. We get not what is right, but what is amazingly good. Do we get what is fair? No, we are gifted with grace and grace by definition isn't about fairness or our worthiness, but solely about God's loving kindness.

Every time, *every time*, we are tempted to size up who is idle and who should be on the receiving end of generosity (God's or ours or others), we need to consider this parable and remember, truth be told, we've gotten not what we deserve, but what God has generously given: mercy, grace, forgiveness, salvation.”

This year of stewardship will be predicated on several basic affirmations. The very first one is that God is generous, generous beyond generosity. Not only is it enough, it is more than enough. The air we breathe. The people around us. The first leaf turning red. Bread and cup. Life itself.

In her book *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson writes that our task is “to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us... to be generous...”

Precious things have been put in our hands, and our calling is to be stewards of those precious things, to note God's generosity all around us, in us, between us. And to respond generously.

Let us pray. We join, O God, with all things now living in a song of thanksgiving to you, our creator, who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us, who guides us on to the end of our days. Help us to know we have enough, and more than enough, and help us to respond gratefully and generously. Amen.