

Sermon "The Generosity of God"

Scripture Readings: Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16

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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 16:2-15. The same God who promised to be with Moses and the people at the burning bush, who demonstrated God's care in the Passover and at the crossing of the Red Sea, now sends manna, Israel's "daily bread," to preserve the people from starvation in the wilderness. The bread is also a witness to the loving and generous God who advocates for the children of Israel, even when they complain. *Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.* Hear now, God's Holy word.

2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. 5 On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, 7 and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" 8 And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against God—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord." 9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, "Draw near to the Lord, for God has heard your complaining.'" 10 And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11 The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 12 "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" 13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 20:1-16. This parable which is unique to Matthew has its closest affinity to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We see the same attitude in the all-day workers as we see in the elder son. An attitude which at first appears reasonable, until we recognize that this story is not about vocation, the equity of wages or punching a time clock. This is a story about the sovereign grace and goodwill of God. Hear now God's Holy word.

1 "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 do you begrudge my generosity?" 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The title of the sermon: The Generosity of God

The text: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Matthew 20:15

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, your power is in your generosity...as is ours. Make us bigger people in the little things. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Then a ploughman said, *Speak to us of work.*

And he answered, *You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth. For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life's procession, that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite. When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music. Which of you would be a reed, dumb and silent, when all else sings together in unison?...*

So writes Kahlil Gibran in his little book The Prophet. Gibran reminds us of something we sometimes forget...that is, the privilege it is to work and the sense of accomplishment and joy that is ours when we work well. This weekend we celebrate the work of this faith community and our participation in it as we introduce the 2018 Stewardship Campaign and as we honor our 50 and 60 year members and the seasons of work in each of their lives.

Work gives us a sense of who we are. When our children grow up or when we approach retirement, we experience uncomfortable feelings because our work, our sense of ourselves changes and becomes redefined. We seek new challenges and responsibilities, a different kind of work in life's procession. Perhaps only those of us who have faced unemployment or disability really understand the quiet desperation of not working, the meaninglessness of idle hours, and the fear of not knowing how we will provide for ourselves and our loved ones.

Sigmund Freud, twentieth century Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, was asked what defines a healthy life. His response was simple and concise. *A life in which one is able to work and to love.* Work is an integral part of who we are, our sense of ourselves, and our relationship with one another. To be denied the privilege to work can be devastating. The parable we read today can be better understood in light of these thoughts. The situation that Jesus describes in the story was very real to his listeners. Theologian William Barkley explains: *The grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and then close on its heels the rains came. If the harvest was not ingathered before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time.*

The wage of a denarius was a normal day's wage for a worker. Although some commentaries refer to it as generous, more importantly is that it was fair. The workers who were standing in the market place were not street corner idlers. The market place was the equivalent of the labor exchange. The workers came in the morning, with their tools, seeking employment. Those who waited all day indicated how much they needed the work. The workers in the parable who began at five in the afternoon were unemployed only because no one offered them a job.

The Master in our parable understood this. In his compassion, he gave those with nothing to do the privilege to work. Then he made another choice. The Master knew that if these laborers went home with less than a day's wage, there would be a hungry family. So he chose in his generosity to give them more than their due reward just as Yahweh provided the daily bread for the Hebrew children working toward the Promised Land. They are given a day's wage. It is only when those that labored all day see what those who worked only an hour receive, that

they expect more. No one has been denied, no one cheated, no one given less than agreed upon. The offense lies in the generosity to others.

And the people grumble---surely a natural response. What makes this parable so powerful is how well we understand their grumbling, and so the answer to the question, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" The answer is "YES! ABSOLUTELY!"

According to theologian and pastor Fred Craddock: *The offense of grace is not in the treatment we receive but in the observation that others are getting more than they deserve. Jonah was offended that God accepted the people of Nineveh. The elder brother resented the generosity of his father when his brother, the prodigal son returns. God's generosity often cuts across our calculations of who deserves what.*

And so for all our talk of grace, the Church still has trouble with it. In the interpretation of this parable, the first and last workers have been identified as the Pharisees and the sinners. At other times they are interpreted as the Jews and the Gentiles. But always and everywhere the parable addresses those who have difficulty celebrating the gift someone else receives. And it is this smallness, this stinginess within our hearts that this parable gives us the opportunity to confront and to change.

And so I would appeal to each one of us, knowing my own tendency toward tightness. May we become people who do not begrudge the generosity of God and the gifts that others receive. May we be generous in our giving and in our forgiving, not because anyone deserves it, but because of who we are. God's generosity is a reflection of God's character, God's Holy Being. When we reflect that generosity in our lives, we reflect the image of the One who created us and the One who joined us in our humanity to share the love of God and to teach us how to live more fully into our humanity.

In this church and in all we do, may we remember these words about work:

Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms from those who work with joy.

And if you sing though as angels, and love not the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of the day and the voices of the night. (The Prophet)

And whatever work you have to do, do everything in love and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, thanking God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. (Colossians 3:17)

Amen.

