

Sermon "Growing in Generosity – Rooted in Faith"  
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-8, Matthew 20:1-15  
Sunday, September 24, 2023  
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In our first scripture reading, Jeremiah 17:5-8, the ancient prophet concurs with the psalmist that a happy or blessed life is one that trusts in God. The metaphors of a tree planted by water and a shrub in the desert provide vivid imagery for those who trust in God and those who trust in themselves. Our 2024 Stewardship Campaign "Growing in Generosity – Rooted in Faith" is based on this text. Hear now, God's Holy Word.

*Thus says the LORD:*

*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD.*

*<sup>6</sup> They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes.*

*They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.*

*<sup>7</sup> Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.*

*<sup>8</sup> They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.*

*It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green;*

*in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. Amen.*

Today we introduce the 2024 Stewardship Campaign, Growing in Generosity – Rooted in Faith. Our second scripture reading is Matthew 20:1-15. In the Parable of the Day Laborers, which is unique to Matthew, we get a glimpse at the wonder and mystery of God's generosity through the events of an ordinary workday during the season of harvest. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of 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?" Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Growing in Generosity – Rooted in Faith

*The text: Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. <sup>8</sup> They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.  
Jeremiah 17:7-8*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, may we live lives of faith that are able to stand tall and branch out with hope and generosity, and now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A beloved Banyan Tree outside the courthouse of Lahaina, Hawaii, is giving the people of this community hope following the devastating fires last month, according to a recent New York Times article by Livia Albeck-Ripka. The 150-year-old tree, which was scorched in one of the five deadliest fires in the USA, began sprouting green leaves this month hinting at the possibility of recovery for the tree and its community. Arborists, who examined the trees' sprouting leaves, branches, and root system, believe it will heal, live, and be born again.

The tree, a banyan fig, was just eight feet tall when it was planted in 1873 to commemorate a Protestant mission to Lahaina a half-century earlier. Years of careful tending by residents helped the tree grow, and today, it the largest of its kind in the United States. Towering more than 60 feet, the banyan tree has become a cherished landmark, a holy giant, and now, a symbol of hope, for the people of this devastated community.

Trees have been a symbol of resilience and hope throughout the ages. The ancient Hebrew compared people who trust in God to a tree planted by water with strong roots. Those with faith have an inner strength to sustain their lives under the most challenging of droughts because they are connected to the source of life, God's merciful and generous spirit. A life rooted in faith has an inner joy, a sense of wellbeing, and is flexible, resilient, and generous.

We are grateful for the deep and elaborate root system, much like the Banyan Tree, within this faith community that has grown strong and wide through the years since our founding in 1835. The faith in which we are rooted is evident in all the ways Westminster branches out in ministries beyond our doors. The faith in which we are rooted is evident in the lives of the members who celebrate milestone anniversaries today. We value the resilience, generosity, and connectedness among us as we stand tall in our community to proclaim the love of Christ in which we are rooted and established.

Clint McCann, Westminster's 2019 Bay Weekend Speaker and Evangelical Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Eden Theological Seminary, reflects on the meaning of the tree metaphor in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary and concludes that the tree symbolizes not primarily the aspect of fruitfulness and doing, but rather, the importance of stability, rootedness, and wellbeing.

Sigmund Freud, Austrian neurologist, and the founder of psychoanalysis in the first part of the twentieth century, when asked to define a healthy person, a person who is grounded with a sense of wellbeing, his response was simple and concise. *One who is able to love and to work.* Working is an integral part of our identity and how we relate to one another. To be denied the privilege to work is devastating. When my mother, Betty Jellema Denham, returned to the workplace following the season of raising very young children, she was so elated she said she

would have paid them for the opportunity to work. Sometimes we forget what a privilege it is to work and the sense of accomplishment and joy that is ours when we work well.

Work gives us a sense of who we are. Those among us who have faced unemployment or disability understand the pain and frustration of not working and the anxiety of not knowing how we will provide for our loved ones.

The situation that Jesus describes in today's parable can be better understood in light of how important work is to our rootedness and sense of wellbeing. Scottish Theologian William Barclay explains the context of today's parable: *Toward the end of September, the grape harvest ripened, and the rains came close on its heels. If the harvest was not ingathered before the rains broke, it was ruined; and so, the harvest was a frantic race against time.*

The workers in this parable who began at five in the afternoon were unemployed only because no one offered them a job. If they did not find work, their family would go hungry because these laborers never made enough money to save. For them, being unemployed for a day was devastating.

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. 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, do they expect more. No one has been denied, no one cheated, no one given less than agreed upon.

As with all Jesus' parables, this story is about more than a day's work and a fair wage. This is a story about the character of God. Jesus wants us to understand that we have a generous God whose mercy is unprecedented. Jeremiah wants us to know that when we trust God and when our lives are rooted in faith and connected to God's spirit, the inner strength that is ours sustains us through the most challenging droughts and expands our branches of wellbeing as we reach beyond ourselves and grow in generosity. By the grace of God, may it be so. Amen.