

Sermon "The Generosity of God"

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

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 16:2-15. The story of Yahweh's miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness is consistent with other narratives of the Exodus. Yahweh is portrayed as a 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 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."

Today we introduce the 2015 Stewardship Campaign, whose theme, Seeds to Branches, is based on one of Jesus' parables describing the kingdom of God. This lovely choral response is from the Taizé Faith Community in France. Our second scripture reading is the Gospel of Matthew 20:1-16. Jesus continues to teach his followers about the kingdom of God. What is it like to live in God's Kingdom? How do we live Christ's justice, peace and joy? How is the world different when God's Holy presence is recognized and honored. 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 work day 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?" 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, as we reflect together on your generosity, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come Lord and open in us the gates of your kingdom.

The first time I heard these words sung was the summer of 2011 at the Taizé Community in France. Peter, Paul and I were in worship surrounded by three thousand youth from around the world singing in harmony and often in different languages. This experience brought a new appreciation for the privilege of belonging to the kingdom of God and the responsibility that is ours in creating God's kingdom through the living of our lives.

The Taizé Community is an ecumenical monastic order composed of about 100 brothers who come from Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic traditions around the world. The order has a strong devotion to peace and justice through prayer, meditation and work. It was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger Schutz, a Swiss Protestant who felt a powerful sympathy for France recently defeated by Germany during the Second World War. In the summer of 1940 he rode his bicycle into France in search of creating a space of silence and work for those deprived of a livelihood and the most discouraged.

That year Roger purchased a small house that would eventually become the home of the Taizé community. Only miles south of the separation line that divided a war-torn country in half, Roger's home became a sanctuary to countless war refugees seeking shelter. Today, the community has become one of the world's most important sites of Christian pilgrimage welcoming over 100,000 young people from around the world each year for prayer, Bible study, sharing, and communal work.

The gospel reading for today is one of the kingdom parables in Matthew's gospel. Matthew refers to the kingdom of God more than any other New Testament author...twenty-five times. He has several parables that give us a glimpse into what life within the kingdom of God is like.

Last week we reflected on the kingdom of God being like a king who forgives a debt that is impossible to repay. The kingdom of God is a place where people, who because they know the forgiveness of Christ, forgive one another.

This week's kingdom parable is about a landowner who hired day laborers for his vineyard. Those of us who have been watching Ken Burn's documentary on The Roosevelts this week were reminded of the hunger and devastation during the great depression and how grateful unemployed Americans were for the generosity of governmental work programs.

In Laura Hillebrand's book, *Sea Biscuit*, the racehorse who was down and out –damaged and yet resilient became a metaphor for all the men and women whose lives were shattered by the depression, by the inability to work, to make a living and to feed their families.

When Sea Biscuit outruns War Admiral, a symbol of elitism, on All Saints Day, November 1, 1938, this was a victory for every struggling, ordinary American whose invincible spirit was determined to overcome the worst of times. Those who lived through the depression recognize that this experience played a formative role in shaping their character. They found strength in weakness, healing in woundedness, gratitude for second chances and a new appreciation for the privilege to work.

Sigmund Freud, in the first part of this century, was asked to define a healthy person and 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. Kahlil Gibran reflects on work in his book *The Prophet*. *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.* Kahlil reminds us of something we sometimes forget when we are overwhelmed by work; and that is the privilege work is and the sense of accomplishment and joy that is ours when we work well.

Work gives us a sense of who we are...and when our work changes...when our children grow up or we approach retirement, our sense of ourselves is redefined. We seek new responsibilities and challenges, a different stride in life's procession. 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 parable we read together today can be better understood in light of these reflections on work. The situation that Jesus describes in this story was very real to his listeners. William Barclay explains: *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 to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time.*

A denarius was a normal day's wage for a worker in this time and place. Some commentaries call it generous, what is more important is it was fair.

The workers who were standing in the market place were not street corner idlers, lazing away their time. 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 persistent they were at seeking work. The workers in this parable who began at five in the afternoon were unemployed only because no one offered them a job. These hired laborers

were left entirely to the mercy of chance employment. If they did not find work, their family would go hungry because these laborers never made enough money to save. For them, 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.

The laborers who worked all day, exhausted, disappointed and feeling unappreciated, begin to grumble. What makes this parable so powerful is how well we understand. Who among us would not feel the same way? ...and so the answer to the question, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" The answer is "YES! ABSOLUTELY!" And no sooner have we spoken our peace that we recognize how stingy we sound. We still feel the same way but we have the insight to recognize it sounds stingy!

The generosity of God quite often cuts across our calculations of who deserves what. This parable addresses the difficulty we have celebrating the gift someone else receives. Fred Craddock points out that what makes grace offensive *is ...not in the treatment that 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 the prodigal son returns.* And it is this smallness, this stinginess within our hearts which we understand too well that Jesus was addressing in the parable of the Day Laborers because he feared it would be the Church's downfall.

As with all Jesus' parables, this story is about more than a day's work and a fair wage. This is a story about who our God is and what life within God's kingdom looks like. Jesus wants us to understand that we have a generous God whose mercy is unprecedented and whose kingdom is filled with enough justice and peace and joy for all God's laborers.

May we not only become people who do not begrudge God's generosity, may we open the doors of our hearts to God's kingdom and discover a generosity and gratitude within ourselves. May we become like the person who took a seed and sowed it in a field, and it grew into a tree with branches that welcomed the birds of the air. So be it! Amen.

Charge and Benediction:

*do not pray for easy lives,
pray to be stronger people,
do not pray for tasks to equal your powers,
pray for powers to equal your tasks
then the doing of your work shall be no miracle,
you shall be a miracle
every day you shall wonder at yourselves,
at the richness of life that has come to you
by the grace of God.*

Phillips Brooks 1835-93
U.S. Protestant Episcopal Bishop