

“Unreasonable Generosity”

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:13-16).

In 2011, a Dutch scientist gave a TED Talk where he explained what he called the “Fairness Study.” It was a controlled experiment designed to illustrate that a sense of justice exists in the animal world. The study involved two monkeys who were each given a simple task and then rewarded with a small piece of cucumber. As the exercise began, both monkeys consistently carried out their jobs and then gladly devoured their edible reward without missing a beat. The drama began when the researcher directing the experiment switched one of the monkeys rewards from a bit of cucumber to a grape. At first, the monkeys completed their tasks just like they’d done before, but when it came time for them to get the reward, the monkey receiving the cucumber looked at the chunk of cucumber and then, instead of eating it, threw it back in the researcher’s face and then began to shake the cage in protest.¹

You can watch a video of the experiment on YouTube and it’s funny to see how angry the monkey gets about his unjust reward but this video also shows us something fundamental about ourselves. We prize fairness above all. We want our work to be recognized, we expect to be justly rewarded for our efforts and when we feel there has been inequity in our treatment, we immediately become outraged. We see it in the classroom, we experience it in our jobs and we feel it most powerfully in our relationships. And this basic truth about fairness leads us right into today’s text.

In this parable, Jesus tells us an unreasonable and outrageous story. The workers hired by the master give a dramatically different level of effort. Some worked for twelve hours, some worked for nine; some are hired for six hours and some for three *and a few of the laborers worked just one hour* and yet, at the end of the day, they all got the same pay. And when we hear this parable it causes us to do more than simply scratch our heads. It’s ridiculous! In fact, it goes against everything we hold dear; it challenges all our notions of what is right and what is fair. One of the first things we learn in life is that people get what’s coming to them. If you have worked harder and longer and more faithfully than others, you should get more. It’s how our economy functions, it’s what our society is based on and, even in the church, where we talk about living by grace alone, we still like to think that we will receive a reward based on what we do. We go to church, we attend meetings, we give financially, we volunteer for the jobs nobody else will do, we “bear the heat of the day” and we are tempted to believe that our extraordinary efforts will count for something, if not here, then certainly when the Master returns. *But did you hear what the Master said?* “I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? *And this ruins us!* Our sinful nature simply can’t comprehend and can’t tolerate the idea that our reward is not based on what we do but completely on the will of the Master. And yet Jesus says that this is what “the kingdom of heaven is like.”

The truth is some *do* labor from dawn to dusk; they really do bear the heat of the day. And many of us know what it means to work for the Master all day. We were Baptized as babies; we grew up in the church; we’ve been Sunday school teachers, church leaders, faithful givers and regular in church attendance. And, of course, we don’t mind at all when the Master goes out and hires others later in the day. In fact, at Emmanuel we’ve rejoiced to see our church grow and to see new people in worship and

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals

Bible class and not one of us would be upset about a deathbed conversion where someone confessed Christ in the eleventh hour. These are all things we celebrate and yet...we still hold on to our scorecards and we still harbor the notion that these new people aren't quite like us. But look at what the Master does: He gives the last as much as He gives the first. He treats them exactly the same and in fact, the last become the first to receive their reward...and our Old Adam grumbles with indignation.

My friends, we need to hear this parable because the sparks of superiority and privilege that flicker in our hearts will consume our souls if they are not put out. Today, in this parable, Jesus is speaking to us and the most important thing He says – and the key to understanding this reading – is found in the words of the Master to the grumbling workers when He asks: “Do you begrudge my generosity?” You see this phrase from the Master takes the focus off the workers and *their* efforts and, as unfair as it may seem to our sinful hearts, points us to the Master and reveals that the Master will do what He wants and what He wants above all...*is to be generous!*

This is what the kingdom of heaven is like and what we see in this parable is that God does what He wants with us instead of treating us as we deserve! Our pride ignores the truth that even our best works are soiled with sin. We may have been laboring in the vineyard all our lives, but our hearts haven't always been in the right place. We've looked down on others. We've judged the failures of those around us and everyday in every way we have sinned and, Scripture tells us, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). *This is the payment we deserve...but God is generous!* And, as we heard in today's first reading from Isaiah, His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8) and, in a way we can't begin to understand, He promises us that He will freely pardon (Isaiah 55:7) and completely forgive and He will do all of this for us because of Christ.

Now, don't think for a second that this generosity undermines the Bible's claim that God just (Romans 3:26). While the forgiveness of God is a completely free gift to us, it has come at a great cost and that cost was paid by Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus Christ physically carried our sins with Him to the Cross and in His suffering and in His death, justice was served. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Colossians 1:21-22). And this is what Peter meant when he said that Christ “himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (I Peter 2:24). These passages tell us that in Christ, the demands of justice have been met and because this is true, God promises us that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

In Jesus, God reveals His unreasonable generosity and in today's parable He shows us that this is what the “kingdom of heaven is like.” This is the same unreasonable generosity that fed 5,000 families of shore of the Sea of Galilee. This is the same unreasonable generosity we see in the father who runs to greet and celebrate the return of his prodigal son. This is the same unreasonable generosity that allowed Jesus to forgive the “Thief on the Cross” and proclaim with His dying breath, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, 39-43). And this is the same unreasonable generosity that today comes to you in this Word; that today you will receive in His Body and Blood; and that today opens the door to heaven and promises you eternal life *when you have done nothing to earn it*. Today, the unreasonable generosity of the Master has been given to us in Christ. And in Jesus Christ, we are saved.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ goes against everything we hold dear. It is not fair. It makes no sense. And today we can thank God that these things are true! Amen.

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