

The Generosity of God's Economy

Matthew 20:1-16

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You may recall at the beginning of the pandemic how we heard that the retail industry, especially the restaurant industry, was impacted. People could not really go out and enjoy the restaurant and bar scene. This was hard on bars especially because much of their profit revenue comes from liquor sales and not the food. I don't know how Michigan handled it, but in Illinois, the local county government changed the liquor laws and allowed mixed drinks to be sold and taken with food orders. Many restaurants converted to only take out and a lot of people stepped up and tried to support the restaurants by tipping more or making it a point to order food more frequently if you could afford it.

We personally didn't have a lot of spare money at the time, but we did have Sam's birthday coming up. Sam is Amy's oldest child who died at eleven years old. To celebrate, it is our tradition to eat out together as a family. We would also pay for another table in the restaurant and give a huge tip to the waitress with a card telling them a little about Sam. Since we couldn't do it like usual, we decided to spread out the blessing to more than one restaurant. We had been binge watching Gilmore Girls so we wanted to do a Gilmore Girls take out night. We chose our favorite food from three different family-owned restaurants. Pizza from Johnsons corner where I received my lovely scar from, our favorite Chinese food from the China Wok, and burgers, fries and dessert from the local diner in Brighton. At each restaurant we also tipped the wait staff in cash and a note about Sam. I remember Jimmie, the owner of Johnson's corner, came out to personally thank us for supporting them. At China Wok – Kelly the owner shared with us how people had been harassing her for being Asian. She teared up when we gave her a tip bigger than our order. The final place at the diner the

waitress who gave us our food was moved by the large tip and said that she had been fretting all day wondering if she would be able to pay rent that month due to lack of hours. Our tip assured her that God was watching out for her too.

Each place we went we saw and experienced the joy of helping lift the spirits of others even beyond what we imagined. People say that when you give generously to others, you get back more than what you give. I totally agree with that.

Our motivation was to do our part to support our local economy and celebrate Sam's memory in a fun way. We wanted to let people know we cared and knew that trying to keep a business afloat during the shut down was hard. No one knew what to expect in the coming months and we certainly didn't know we would still be dealing with it three years later.

When I think about how that generosity helped all those involved, even for a moment, I wondered if that sense of generosity is also in this parable. Some would argue that this parable is about ungrateful workers, while others would argue that it is about the generous landowner. For me it is a matter of perspective or what you are paying attention to. When I look at the actions of the Landowner, I see a person who is generous with his workers. He is not out to cheat anyone. He negotiates with the first workers and agrees upon what was fair for a day's wage.

The landowner is also, perhaps, community oriented. When you ponder the actions of the owner, going out numerous times to find more workers, there is very little to go on. We assume he needed more workers, but nothing in the story says so. We don't see him questioning why these later workers were not there earlier. We don't even know why he goes out one last time with just an hour left in the day. The story only says that each time he assured the new recruits that he will pay them "what is right."

Amy and I were batting around different possibilities as to why they were there and not first thing. What do you think could be some of the reasons why these workers came out later in the day or were not hired by others?

_____?

What is interesting in each of our answers is this is how we justify or rationalize why we think they should or should not be hired. But the landowner just seems to be responding to the need for them to have work. He doesn't even question the honesty of their statements that "no one would hire us." If we have a scarcity mentality, there is a stronger expectation that we make sure our money is being spent wisely. We don't want to encourage laziness. We don't want to reward bad behavior. If we think they are going to just waste it on liquor, why should we enable them? We feel better when we can see the need first, like someone who is physically injured. Our capitalistic culture puts a priority on fiscal responsibility and being fair, even if that fairness is arbitrary to begin with. That is the way the world seems to operate, but as we saw last week God's kingdom tends to do things very differently.

The key, I think, comes in the second half of the parable when the landowner has the foreman pay the last workers first. That is where the twist comes in, right? As if he is doing it for a specific reason. I really wonder if the landowner is doing this to see how the other workers react. If the landowner had paid the all-day workers first, they may not have stayed around and seen his generosity. But in this set up to see how they react. They become indignant and expect more pay. Culturally we may even agree with them. How many of us thought that the landowner was being irresponsible and if every landowner operated that way, people would not be up and waiting to do a full day's work? How many of us would argue that it's only fair that the longest workers were compensated more.

So, are we saying that some people are worth more than others? That every person must pull their own weight and each person is on their own? Would we then agree with the argument that only the early bird gets the worm. Or that only the fittest survive? Those are arguments we hear even today, right?

But here the kingdom of God is like this Landowner who provided employment to all who said yes. Same wage, a fair wage and there was no stipulation to what qualifies them to work. I would even argue that the landowner knew that each worker

represented a family of hungry mouths to feed. Maybe, he was being generous because he had a sense of community to care for others, who needed the added support. He was a lifeline, just like we tried to be a lifeline to the restaurants three years ago.

Could it be that Jesus is saying that the wage, what we may call salvation, is the same for all. There is no way to earn it more or less, it is equal for all. As the church in Matthew's time is growing and spreading across Asia Minor we are seeing more and more non-Jewish believers. Some argued that salvation in Jesus was only meant for the Jewish believers, therefore Greek believers needed to first convert to Judaism. Paul argued strongly against those added steps to inclusion within the church. Some resented the mingling of cultures, economic status and even the sharing of property equally, giving to those who were in need. We see in other writings in the letters of Paul and Acts there is a growing tension regarding these different cultural and economic differences in the church.

Could it be that when we fail to see others as intrinsically worthy of dignity, equality and respect as human beings worthy of salvation that we are envious of God's abundant generosity or grace?

Could it be, when the parable says the first shall be last and the last will be first it is really saying that the first will be equal to the last and the last will be equal to the first. Like how Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

Let us, as the Psalmist says "Celebrate the fame of God's abundant goodness and sing aloud of God's righteousness. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." May the saints of God rejoice.