



North Shore
Congregational
Church

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Fruits of the Spirit: Generosity”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Ephesians 3:14-21; Matthew 20:1-16

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Before we get into our second reading, I'd like to take a minute to recap, a bit, where we've been this summer. With a gap of these past two Sundays while I was away, I want to take just a couple of minutes to get us all back on the same page. We are now in week 6 of our summer endeavor into Paul's nine fruits of the Spirit. In Galatians 5, Paul lays out 9 ways in which we can live in the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit," Paul says, is 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' Critical to our approach to this series, however, is that Paul distinctly sets these fruits up as a choice. "Live by the Spirit," Paul says, "and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." This is not something that is an after-effect or symptom of faith. Paul sets before the Galatians (and us) a choice between living according to the temptations of this world and living by the fruits of the Spirit of God. We must choose, Paul makes clear, to live in such ways.

So, we're taking one each week and asking that question. How do we choose to live in love, in joy, in peace, and so forth. We are looking at those questions, however, through the lens of the parables that Jesus shared. So, for today, as we look at what it means to choose to live in generosity, I want to begin by looking at the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard that we read in Matthew 20.

"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 a denarius for the day, 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 a denarius. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 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 a denarius? 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 are you envious because I am generous? 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Now, the first thing that starts flooding my mind when I read this parable is the fundamental question of fairness. I think back to the younger days of our kids crying out, in some way or another, 'That's not fair!' Whether it was about the one who got the extra cookie, or got to stay up an extra ten minutes past bedtime, or had more screen time, or whatever the 'desirable' of the moment was, the conversation was so often framed, for them, through that worldview of fairness being defined as no one ever having an opportunity or advantage that they didn't receive themselves!

I get it. I think we all know what it's like to feel that way. And, if I'm honest about it, I think I'd have to admit that I get where some of those laborers are coming from in Jesus' tale. If I put myself in the shoes of that person who has been toiling in the hot sun for the last 10 hours, who is then handed the same piddly wage as the one who showed up 45 minutes ago, you can imagine I wouldn't be happy either. I'd be angry too. I'd be complaining too. I worked harder. I worked longer. It's not fair! I *deserve* more than he does! Which brings us to the second thing that comes quickly to mind when I read this passage – 'You get what you deserve.'

Of course, we often use that phrase with something of a negative connotation to it – retribution... punishment... 'just desserts...' – 'I hope you get what you deserve.' The truth, however, is that we are culturally imbued with a certain sense of a meritocracy to life. Sure, we could debate for hours how much of the socio-economic construct of the United States is based on a meritocracy, how much is based on status at birth, how much is gleaned from generational wealth, how much is sheer dumb luck, and so on. Regardless of all that theoretical debate, however, I think there is an undeniable sensibility in a large swath of the American psyche that consciously or subconsciously connects what we have with what we've 'earned.' To say that we 'get what we deserve,' in both good and bad ways, is a notion we all understand! And, frankly, it's notion that, at least in many ways, we're ok with.

The challenge with all of that in the context of this parable that we get in Matthew 20, however, is that, despite our natural sensibilities regarding fairness, I am confident that, in the end, we don't want it to be that way – at least with God! Whether we realize it or not in the moment of our reading, the more we identify with that person that showed up at dawn, the more we are missing the frequency in which, in God's eyes, we are the latter. Take pause for a moment and just consider... when it comes to God's grace, do we really want fairness? When it comes to God's mercy, do we really want to get what we deserve? The fundamental point that Jesus is making, when we view this story through the eyes of those in that line, is that there are ways in which we may be like those who showed up at dawn and there others in which we are much more akin to those who showed up later and did little to deserve what is coming – and the last thing we want in those moments is for God to be fair!

Now, hold on to that, but what happens if we look at this story not through the eyes of the workers, but through those of the landowner? What happens if we consider this same story, but

instead of placing ourselves amongst those who worked so hard (which I think is the natural proclivity for most readers) but instead put ourselves in the shoes of the man looking out at this line of people who showed up that day to work?

Imagine that moment of looking down at those you have hired to assist you throughout the day. What do you see? Right before you, you see those men whose clothes are barely soiled, on whom the beads of sweat have yet to even form. Behind them the clothes are bit dirtier, the foreheads a bit more damp, and the shoulders just slightly slumped. The further you go down line, the more ragged the clothes become, the more drenched are their cloaks, and the more hunched are their backs. Somehow, however, none of that matters. That sense of merit and entitlement that they hold is simply not how you see it. The obligation they imbue upon you to treat them with some constructed notion of ‘fairness’ is not your understanding. What you see is two things and two things only. You see a resource that you have to share, and you see a line of people standing in front of you who would benefit from it. Period. You don’t see who worked harder, who worked longer, or who in any way or another somehow ‘deserves’ more than another – you see a resource you can share and people you can share it with – and that’s what you do.

That, of course, says a lot to us about the heart and nature of God, which I think is the core of what Jesus was trying to bring to light here. I want to suggest, however, that it can also speak volumes to the heart of the generosity that Paul is naming in Galatians 5. You may or may not note that some translations translate this word as ‘goodness’ in lieu of generosity. I think either can work, but I think that inherent in either translation is a sense of an intrinsic presence of that sensibility. Said another way, Paul is talking about being good or generous person for the sake of being good or generous. Nothing more. Nothing less.

When we look at Jesus’ story through the eyes of landowner, we quickly see that merit, deservedness, effort, value and everything else seem to fall out of the equation. We also, I would suggest, see that any question of ‘what’s in it for me’ seems to disappear as well. This act of the landowner in this moment is neither guided by what benefits some of the recipients over others nor what benefits the landowner himself. What guides the actions of the landowner is a pure and unequivocal sense of being generous with that which he has received for the benefit of others that can be blessed by it. Period.

So, imagine what it might mean if we followed such an example. Imagine how we might see differently that which we have to share in life. What if we stopped asking what has been earned, what is deserved, or what’s fair, but asked instead, using Paul’s language in Ephesians, what can be accomplished through God’s abundance granted to us? What if took on the lens of that landowner and stopped looking at the world through the eyes of merit and fairness but instead generosity, mercy and grace? And, perhaps as important as anything in such a reframing, what if we understood that call to generosity to apply to so much more than wealth. Our time. Our energy. Our attention. Our grace. Our benefit of the doubt. Our forgiveness. Our patience. Our listening. Our love. I could go on and on. What might life look like – for us and those around us – if we gave such things with the abundance with which we have received them from God, with no consideration of what we, they, or anyone else has deserved along the way?

I encourage you, in the days and weeks ahead, to look around. Consider how you spend your time... how you spend your attention... how you spend your encouragement... your forgiveness... your love... And, more to the point, when you find yourself asking whether or not they 'deserve' it, ask instead what Paul's spirit of generosity would look like in that moment – and choose to follow suit.