

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

25th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Title: "Offensive Generosity"

Most Christians who take the faith seriously trust that the Bible is a primary source for faith, a guide. "Sola Scriptura"--"By Scripture alone"--taught Martin Luther. For John Wesley it was one of four sources for making decisions throughout life. His quadrilateral--scripture, tradition, experience and reason--he taught as a balanced tool in considering difficult choices. But scripture he referred to as the primary source as he, like Luther, claimed to be a man of one book.

This is one of those stories, however, when I wish it wasn't so. This is one of those teaching parables I sometimes wish we could rip from the pages of the Gospel. It's not a warm fuzzy, justice filled, rewarding experience. It's not a story revealing Jesus' sharp intellect that foils his opponents. Or a story in which he reveals the power of God through healing. It's not a story in which the good guys win in the end or the hardest worker receives a just reward. What happens here is patently unfair. And if we hear it otherwise, I suspect we aren't listening very well. What happens here is quite plainly offensive.

When I was 9 or 10 one of my best friends was a farmer. His father raised cash crops: wheat, sugar beets, corn, soybeans, pumpkins. Another friend also farmed. His father raised green peppers, beans, squash, cucumbers and cantaloupe among other things. Every summer these two fathers took advantage of their sons' friends to help out around the farms. So if it looked like the crops were ripe enough to pick, I'd get a call the night before, "Harris, you wanna pick beans tomorrow?" There weren't many times I turned them down. As I shared in our last worship series on money, even by that age we are taught very well: if you work you'll be rewarded with cash. Cash gives you freedom and stuff.

So I'd get up at the crack of dawn, ride my bike to Tom's house and out to the fields his Dad would take us in the back of his pickup. And we'd pick until the field was clean, racing all the way to see who could pick the most quarts or buckets or bushels depending on what we were picking at the time. Because another quart meant more money.

I remember very well waking up in the fields as we picked plants that had been cooled and soaked by the morning dew, fingers sometimes wrinkled by the night-time watering. The earth sticking to our wet hands. Sometimes when it was very early and it was so cool and humid we could see our breath. As the day progressed, the sun evaporated the dew, filling the air with warm humidity. Then the sweat would roll.

Carrying full baskets back to the end of the field where Tom's Dad kept track of who picked what and collected the crop as we worked. Walked back to where we left off. The sun scorching hot. Sweating some more. By the end of the day even we kids were weary and worn. So I can promise you that if Tom's Dad brought in other pickers as we were nearly finished with the field and they picked an

hour. Then he lined everyone up beginning with the last hired and gave them the same pay as the rest of us, there would have been a mutiny. I wouldn't have gone back. Nor would my other friends who had worked all day. So I understand the laborers' grumbling. I suspect you do too.

We are indoctrinated with a sense of fairness. That honest work deserves fair pay. And that lesson is taught well from early on. Fairness and justice is a biblical concept, right? The words of Jesus in Luke: "...the laborer deserves to be paid." (Luke 10:4.) Or what about the famous words of the prophet Amos: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." What's right is right! What's fair is fair!

You may remember when the Winter Olympic games were held in Salt Lake City the scandal that arose in the pairs figure skating event. Everyone was shocked when the judges awarded the gold medal to the Russian couple instead of the Canadian pair. The Russians had stumbled a couple of times in their routine. But the Canadians hadn't made a single error. People were incensed. Couldn't understand it. Until that is the French Judge confessed that she had been pressured by other judges to give preferential treatment to the Russians. Eventually, a second gold medal was awarded the Canadians and reforms were begun to eliminate the degree of subjectivity that had been inherent in judging figure skating competition.

When we see blatant, unfair inequities, it troubles us. When CEOs receive million dollar plus bonuses while labor is asked for significant concessions because the company is struggling. When superintendents are given significant wage increases in spite of low morale among teachers and low test scores among students. People might understand generous salaries if an organization is producing excellent results, but when they're not and the top people are rewarded in spite of poor performance, it frustrates people.

So what in heaven's name is Jesus doing telling this parable in Matthew that apparently condones the practice of rewarding people who simply have not produced as much as those who worked all day? It would have been far simpler, Jesus, if you hadn't told this parable at all. It would have been far easier if we could ignore teachings like this and continued to reinforce our convictions about fairness. Why do you twist us so?

I don't know this, of course, but I suspect Jesus would not have made a very strong labor leader. It's doubtful he would have been elected president or committee chair. Not when he tells stories like this. The union membership would have had him for lunch. Can you imagine a shop run like that? Doesn't matter what time you're hired, you'll get the same pay regardless. But he's not referring to labor-management agreements here. This story is not about fair treatment.

Let's take a look at who these people are in the parable. The hired hands are day laborers. They are not landowners. They are not children earning extra spending money in the fields. And they were not part of a society that provided unemployment or disability or retirement benefits. If they didn't work that day, chances are the family didn't eat very well that day, if they ate at all. The late comers, then, if their pay was equitable may not have had enough to feed the family given the meager earnings of an hour's work. Can you imagine going home to your kids and spouse with the news that there was no work today or only an hour's work today. Not enough to feed everybody. Feeling a failure. Can't even take care of your own family. Can you imagine?

If the parable had been told reinforcing our stiff code of fairness, the last would have been last and the first first. People might have gone hungry and it would have been okay. Fair is fair, after all. But not with this landowner. This boss turns our sense of fairness on its ear with one simple word: "generous." "Are you envious because I am generous?" Everyone receives the same compensation. Everyone is fed. And even though he could have avoided the controversy by paying the first first and sent them away so they didn't witness his generosity, he chose quite the opposite as if to say, "Watch this. I want you to witness this act of love and care."

This is not the kind of generosity at which we marvel, like that of the great saintly Mother Theresa of Calcutta who spent her lifetime caring for the poorest of the poor, the sick and the dying in urban India. This is offensive generosity. But, as I said, it has nothing to do with labor-management agreements. It has everything to do with the way in which God addresses human beings. This is Kingdom behavior: "Generous". And while my sense of fairness—and maybe yours too—might have left someone hungry, God ignores our strict codes in order to give life. God chooses instead to provide what is needed and even more than what is needed.

You might find it interesting to note that this story in the Gospel According to Matthew follows the story of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. The man has everything he needs in life and more. He's wealthy. But he's also good. Has kept the law and the commandments all his life. What more would be needed for him to live eternally? Maybe you remember Jesus' response: "You lack one thing. Sell all you have and give to the poor."

I wonder sometimes if we get confused. Given our absorption in this life with labor-management kinds of relationships, relationships that are based on what we think is fair, relationships that are based on earning one's pay--because we are so absorbed in these kinds of relationships in which value is placed on a person according to hours worked or product produced, do we extend that thinking to our relationship with God? Are we the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and asks, "What do I have to do to connect with God in a way that is timeless, never-ending, always present? What do I have to do to get there, to earn that?" Of course, you remember how he responded to the young man.

But then he moves quickly to this parable of people who according to our way of doing things, earn different levels of pay. As if to say, "You can't earn God's generosity. You can't. You don't get to decide if God is generous or not or how God chooses to be generous. That's not up to you. It's simply given. A gift. God doesn't fit in our box. It's not the way God works. God works outside the limitations of our expectations."

So what do we do with such a God, a God who refuses to conform to our sense of what's right? When I think about it, I think I'll move over to God's side. Because when I meet God, I need that generosity. When I'm less than I have wanted to be or expected to be. When I have made mistakes--when I have moved in the wrong direction-- I need that offensive generosity myself. Sometimes I might be standing at the front of the line, sometimes at the back. All I know is God's generosity is a gift to anyone in that line waiting to be paid. And rather than sit and grumble with those paid last or with the elder brother in the prodigal son story who is angry that his father would welcome his wayward son home with a party, it is better to know that **there is a far richer life found in being grateful for being paid at all** and recognizing that the point is not fairness in God's economy. The point in God's economy is found in giving life to people irrespective of hours or days or years worked. **When I'm in need of forgiveness I'll take generous over fair any day.**

I appreciate what a Roman Catholic priest reflected on this parable:

“...if that's really what I get from God--"generous"-- then I need to look at the standards I apply to others. Like the kids at school: not judging them by their looks, or if they are on the varsity team, or have the latest jeans and sneakers. I will need to look at the standards I apply to others and treat all people graciously; whether or not they live in my part of town; have my level of income, education, travel experiences and status on the corporate ladder. I must be sure not to hold back a gracious welcome to the "late-comers" to my parish community or to this country. If I want to stay under the generous judgment I already have received from God, then I had better not walk away judging others by another standard than the one used to judge me---the generous one!”

Or to put it another way according to the prophet Isaiah,

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).