

“Generous Beyond Reason”

Matthew 20:1-16

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Before launching into this sermon, I need to say something about the nature of a parable. A parable is different from an allegory, different from a story or a narrative or an essay. A parable is a word picture that asks to be taken as a whole. A parable, taken as a whole, illustrates a profound truth, perhaps more than one truth. Though the details of a parable may be intriguing, even beguiling, it's the broad picture of the parable that wants to be grasped.

I needed to say that because the details of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard tend to distract the reader from the deeper truth. One guy works all day; another works half a day; another works only an hour; yet, they all get paid the same wage! Instantly, we're off on a conversation about fair labor practices, minimum wage, household allowances, and other topics one would expect to cover at the Harvard School of Business or the London School of Economics.

Therefore, let's not get bogged down in the details of this parable. Let's look at the big picture to capture at least one of the theological truths Jesus had in mind.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard begins as so many of the parables do, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” When we hear those words, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” we know that what follows will be a teaching on life when it is lived as God hopes it will be lived.

When I read this parable, what strikes me as the central truth is the profound satisfaction that is discovered when one chooses to be generous beyond reason! In my view, Jesus looked around at the people in his community and noticed a lack of abundance in their spirit, noticed a gloom and doom attitude, almost an absence of joy! It occurs to him that his neighbors have not yet discovered the mysterious way that a generous heart transforms the deepest darkness. It's a generous heart he's after!

Ironically, a generous heart spawns jealousy and envy. After all the laborers in the vineyard have been paid, they begin to grumble about the unfairness of the pay scale even though they had each agreed to work for such and such a wage. I love the land owner's reply, "If I want to be generous beyond reason with what is mine, what is that to you?" The good news of this parable lies in the invitation to consider being like the vineyard keeper. Some would call him a fool. Jesus points to him as an example of how God hopes life will be lived! Thus, once again, Jesus' teachings are counter to many cultural norms. (Why, doesn't he know you have to clean your plate to deserve dessert?) Apparently, God's economy differs from the established principles of macro and micro economics taught in our finest universities!

Three quick examples of God's economy come to mind. The first is from literature. Charles Dickens understood this great mystery of generosity. His drama, A Christmas Carol, is on my all-time top five list of great stories. We meet old Mr. Scrooge. His name is pseudonymous with tightfisted stinginess. He won't even afford a lump of coal to warm his shop. The word generosity doesn't exist in his vocabulary. All that changes as he is visited by ghosts in the night, ghosts who awaken his soul to what matters in this life. He wakes up Christmas morning with a serious change of heart. He sends a servant to buy the biggest turkey at the butcher shop and to deliver it to the poorest family in town: the Bob Cratchit family.

I particularly like George C. Scott's rendition of Scrooge on Christmas morning! His whole countenance has changed. His body giggles and jiggles with joy as he passes out money to charities he had previously snubbed. His soul is suddenly alive. His face reeks of merriment. He has discovered the intoxicating thrill of being generous beyond reason! Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge is MY role model. He is now living his life according to the vision set forth in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

The second example is a true story from the city of Philadelphia. Maybe a century ago, a little girl presented herself for Sunday School at the local Baptist Church. Though she was told there was no more room, clearly it was her tattered, ratty looking clothes that caused her rejection. The pastor happened to witness this mean spirit of rejection and intervened, finding her a place in the classroom. Later that night, the girl is said to have prayed that there would be room for ALL the children like her, from the Projects.

Two years later, the child had died. The same pastor was summoned to the apartment. In lifting her body, he found a tattered red purse tucking in by the mattress. Inside was the 57 cents she had saved up over the previous two years. Along with the 57 cents was a note: "This is to help build the little church bigger so more children can go to Sunday School." When the pastor read this note from the pulpit, money started pouring in. The note was published in the Philadelphia newspaper and more money poured in. An education wing was added. A hospital was built. A center for neighborhood children. Today, in one of the classrooms there hangs a picture of this girl. The church is now Temple Baptist Church. It is on the campus of Temple University where my brother Bill has taught religion. Along with the Liberty Bell, this classroom is a must-see on your next visit to the City of Brotherly Love. It is known locally as the 57 cents church.

This little girl owned no vineyard; she simply owned a vision of a generous heart. Hattie May Wiatt is my role model. Her generosity was beyond reason. She lived her short life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

It always pains me when someone's generosity causes another to be envious. The Parable points this out. It is tragic whenever generosity is the cause of grumbling. Whether it's 57 cents or the largest turkey in the butcher shop, let there be praise for a generous heart!

Finally, let me share a South Church story that I told once before. For me, it's a very personal story that illustrates the great truth about the satisfaction of a generous heart. Indeed, this story has contributed much to my understanding of what it means to be a faithful disciple. And it reminds me again of how often it is the children who are our best teachers.

It was maybe 1957 or 1958. I was attending Sunday School right here at South Church. All the kids went to Sunday School in those days. It wasn't really an option. Among my best friends was Greg Ordway. We were in the same grade. He lived on Water Street. He had just had a birthday party, and he had brought his best gift in an envelope to show me. It was five one dollar bills. In that moment, he was like a millionaire! FIVE DOLLARS! Most of us would have thought we were rich if we had a quarter! At the offering time, during the Sunday School class, I watched unbelievably as Greg Ordway placed one whole dollar bill into the basket! I didn't say a word. He didn't say a word. But there was a smile on his face like no smile I had ever seen before. On reflection, I see that it was that smile of the deep satisfaction, the joy, that comes with being generous beyond reason. He has been my role model. He helps me understand God's wildest hope for my own life.

Preachers have found other truths in this parable. Undoubtedly, other truths abide here. Yet, as I lived with this parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard this week, it was the generosity beyond reason that touched my heart. As always, I share my interpretation of Scripture with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.