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A Little Generosity Pentecost 15

Vicar Jason Ashby¹

Text: Matthew 20:1:16

In our gospel reading this morning we are told that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. He goes out, and begins to seek out workers from among those who are standing about idle but also willing to work. And after he finds and connects with a group of workers who are willing to work, for a minimal but sufficient daily wage, he then sends them into his vineyard to begin their daily labours.

A short time thereafter we are told, he returns again and again to the market, each time gathering more and more workers. Until finally, we are told that late in the afternoon near the end of the working day, the landowner goes out one last time, only to find yet another group of able but idle workers standing about with nothing to do. And so, with the work day nearly done he asks them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?”. And what we hear is not that they were unwilling to work, or that they were even unable to work, but that no one had hired them.

Now we can imagine any number of reasons why these people hadn’t been hired, reasons probably not so different than the reasons why many people remain unemployed in our own community: insufficient education, poor health, criminal records, insufficient documentation, the wrong gender, insufficient childcare, no references, and on and on. But it seems for the landowner, that he’s willing to look past these potential obstacles, for he knows that in the vineyard there is no shortage of work to be done, and so in his eyes, all who are willing, are also able.

But what’s interesting is that with this final group he offers them no guarantees whatsoever. He simply allows them to work in the vineyard, all they get is an opportunity, the chance for something more, and perhaps with this a bit of hope. When the day finally comes to an end, the landowner sends his manager out to call all the workers together.

And moving along from those who were the very last to be hired, to those who were hired first, he gives to each of them a full-day’s pay, one denari, probably enough to provide for their families for one more day. But this doesn’t sit well with those workers who were hired first, because as they see it, they’ve worked and toiled the whole day long, only to receive the same pay as these other people, who have come much later, and have really only worked for a fraction of the time.

And so, the text tells us that they ‘grumbled’ against the landowner saying, “these last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the entire day and the scorching heat”.

Now I have to tell you, when I hear this story, I can’t help but sympathize with this first group of workers, the ones who’ve worked all day long. They’ve laboured in the vineyard for the entire day, worked hard for all they have, and it’s not much, only now to see this other

¹ This sermon was preached at Zion Lutheran Church in Stratford, ON, on September 24th, 2017.

group of people receiving the same pay for doing much less, for doing almost nothing at all. It really doesn't seem right.

In fact, this parable that Jesus puts before us this morning, is offensive in a way, it's offensive to our understanding of what it means to receive justice, to receive equal pay for equal work. And it flies in the face of that commonly held notion, that if you want something in this life, then you should have to have to work for it like everyone else.

There was an article in the newspaper a few weeks back, maybe you read it too, it had a headline something like "Province of Quebec to Hand out 4000 welfare checks to Illegal Asylum Seekers. And I know that as a Vicar, I should probably be like oh that's good we're helping the refugee's, let's spread it around, but if I'm honest, that's not the first place my mind went. In fact, when I read that headline, the first thought that came to my mind was, why are my tax dollars paying to write checks for people who aren't even Canadian, people who legally, aren't even supposed to be here. It didn't make a lot of sense to me.

Now, of course I'm not actually from Quebec, and I've never paid a single dollar in taxes there. I've never actually met any of the people involved, especially none of the people seeking refuge. I really don't have anything at all to gain or lose from the generosity being extended here by the people of Quebec.

But in my mind, like the minds of those workers who had to work the full day for what they have, that's all beside the point. Because in mind, even before I've read the article mind you, it's already become a matter of principle. If they get it, I should get too. If I have to work for it, they should have to work just as hard.

Now the problem with this, is that when I allow these kinds of thoughts to spin around in my head, when I allow these feelings to grow from a reaction into a resentment. Well then, I also begin to allow my genuine concern as a human being for the welfare of others to be shoved aside, to be pushed down to the bottom of my thought process. And I can very quickly begin to forget that these headlines, these stories that we hear about, are actually about people.

There's not this block of society called refugees, there's not a group called Asylum seekers trying to take over. Their just people in need of help, people in a bad situation, counting on the generosity of strangers and of landowners, not for a hand out or an easy ride, but so they can live another day, and have hope in the days that follows.

But here in lies the power of the Gospel, the power to transform and make new. It's never a Gospel that casts me aside or dismisses my thinking as insensitive or self-centered, though it often is.

Instead, it's a Gospel which challenges, and encourages us to discern what it is that we actually believe, not to simply accept as truth, the first thoughts that come pouring into our minds, or the loudest thoughts that trigger the biggest response or emotion.

In a very real way, this Gospel that has passed down to us, is a Gospel that works upon us, and within us, to halt our conformity to the thinking of the world, and to reshape our priorities, and equip us for the work of our Lord in the world. And so yes, when I read headlines like the one I mentioned before, there is a part of me that reacts in a way that is still defensive and self-preserving. And each time I hear the parable of the good landowner, there is a part of me that seems to always sympathize and identify with those grumbling workers.

But there is also something more benevolent at work inside of me, something that admires and is perhaps even envious of the generosity that, that landowner showed to those

who were most in need of a place to be, a reason to be, in need of honest work, and in need of their daily bread. And it's this kind of *gracious* generosity, that our Lord seems to be encouraging in the lives of his disciples, encouraging in our lives.

And that's why it's so important that when we hear this parable, that we don't simply equate our own lives, with the lives of the workers, nor equate the generous landowner with God. Because that's not what the parable tells us. And though such a move on our part would have much to say about the grace and generosity of God, it would also unjustly relieve us of our privileged responsibilities as the landowners in this place, and of this time. Instead, we're told from the outset of this parable, that it is the 'kingdom of heaven' which is like the landowner.

That is, when God reigns in our lives, when God is at work in the world, it is like a landowner who goes out looking for strangers in need of a place, in need of work, in need of food, in need of love, regardless of merit, regardless of what our newspapers tell us about their worth; simply as an act of grace.

And so, we are reminded through this parable, that when we bear grace into the world, and when we bear generosity into the world, then we, like the good landowner, come bearing God's kingdom into the world. And I've seen this Kingdom coming, coming through this place, through this church, and through each of you.

I see the kingdom come in the way in which you welcome the newcomer and the kindness that you've shown to strangers simply passing through.

I see it in the small groups, and the meals and the fellowship you offer to your neighbors and to one another.

I see it in all the offerings that this congregation makes to the CLWR, how many lives have been sustained, how many people have been given hope by this generosity.

And I've seen it in your commitment to the settlement of refugee families right here in your own home town. This is no small thing in the eyes of the Lord.

But above all brothers and sisters, I see it in your love for God, and your willingness to continue along this journey of discipleship together. As we sang out with our Psalmist this morning: The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Ps. 145:8). As we go out from here today, let us hold fast to the assurance of our Lord's abundance and His generosity, so that we might be open to the transforming of our minds, and open to His work through us as a means of His living grace; in the lives of those around us, and in the life of a world that is so desperately in need of a little generosity.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.