

Generosity Compassion

Matthew 20:1-15

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Prayer for Understanding Ever present Lord, we thank you for your word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Holy Spirit open our eyes to the signs of your presence, open our ears to your voice and open our minds to your wisdom. Amen.

Jesus said, **Matthew 20:1-15 NRSV** “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 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?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 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.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, 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 day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”

One discovers God’s wisdom for us by placing yourself in the position of each person or group in a parable. In this sermon, I hope to help you imagine yourself as each person. I will be making “you” statements and asking questions, as an invitation for you to wrestle with the statements and questions to perceive God’s specific message for you. You may disagree with some of the statements. The purpose of making the statements is for you to decide if the statement is true for you, or not, and what is God inviting you to do and be through this parable.

Imagine you are a laborer that started work at 5 pm, worked for one hour and received a full day’s pay. You are grateful for the gracious, unearned, generosity of your employer. You are aware that some of the full day laborers who received the same pay are jealous, so you are careful to not escalate their jealousy. In the parable, the full day laborers acknowledge that the employer has made everyone equal. You view your worth, your giftedness, your value, as equal to everyone else. You are grateful that you do not need to compete with your fellow laborers because regardless of productivity or time worked, all are equal. You have great self-esteem due to knowing your value comes from being a beloved, unique child of God and not from productivity, accomplishments, work, family, or giftedness. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we can only get through the ordeal by the grace, gifts, support, kindness and help of others. In these situations, how do you ensure that you view yourself as equal. How do you accept gifts, and feel good about accepting gifts, when you are unable to offer anything in return? Is this parable demanding liberation for the excluded, oppressed and anyone who faces unjust barriers?

Theodore Roosevelt said, “Comparison is the thief of joy.” Imagine you are a full day laborer. Would you expect more pay than what you agreed upon with your employer, when you see the one-hour workers getting a full day’s pay? How do you minimize your jealousy or frustration with the one-hour workers? How do you keep performing at your best, working a full day and being highly productive when you know everyone will receive the same pay? How do you celebrate your employer who treats everyone as equal? You are glad your employer is generous, compassionate, and gracious. You are glad that everyone is receiving enough pay to live a basic life and you are content to receive less money, so others can enjoy life. You view your pay not as something you earn or deserve rather as gift given to you. Is this parable teaching that all people regardless of religion or no belief in God, are equal, all receiving the pay of glorious eternal life in heaven?

Imagine you are the landowner. You are generous, compassionate, and gracious. You believe every person should have enough money to meet their basic needs and you give away your money to make your belief reality. You promote and celebrate equality. You treat all people equal. You value the person with high productivity and the person with low productivity as equal. You value the person who works a full day and one hour as equal. You remain non-anxious, calm, compassionate and gracious as the full day workers complain and insult you. You find joy in serving others, generously giving to others. Rather than striving for wealth or power you seek to generously love everyone. Is this parable to be lived out in our country today? Are all people, of all colors, of all ages, citizens, and immigrants to be treated as equals? Should all people have equal access to education, health care, and housing? Should all people be provided with enough money to enjoy the necessities of life? These questions and statements are for you to wrestle with the Holy Spirit and perceive how God is calling you to be and live.

My dad was a landowner and a farmer. My dad was a lifelong Presbyterian, an elder and ordained lay pastor. My Dad strived to be generous, compassionate, and gracious.

In elementary I was bullied by a couple of older youth on the bus. My mom figured this out when I kept asking for more lunch, so I would have enough for the youth to steal and hide some for myself. My parents got the names of the youth from me. They visited the parents of these youth. I do not know what was said, but I do know from that point on I was treated well. Out of frustration, I called them a negative name. My dad taught me that it is never appropriate to call someone a negative name. Name the behavior that is hurtful or wrong and love and respect the person. I cannot recall my dad ever calling anyone a negative name. A year later, the father of one of the youth became ill. We joined other farmers in harvesting their crops, that fall the older youth befriended me.

My dad served 25 years on the school board. He listened to everyone. When someone was angry, he calmly informed them that he would listen to everything they had to say with a few exceptions, no name calling, no disrespect of anyone, and no raising one's voice. After the person shared everything, they wanted to say he would explain the other sides of the issue. Next, he asked them what they thought was the most loving solution for everyone. I noticed there were a few frequent complainers that my dad asked to follow him as he did farm work. When they started repeating themselves or being unreasonable my dad would shift to a dirty stinky job, still he always listened. I was told at meetings my dad would present all the perspectives he heard from people, even those with which he disagreed. He often asked, who is being left out? He voted for the option that he perceive to be the most loving choice for all people.

My dad enjoyed winning whether it was in sports or showing dairy cattle, yet most people never noticed his competitiveness. We were taught to always follow all the rules, to never take shortcuts, be a good sport, and help our competitors. Often my dad would loan equipment and groom the animals of competitors who needed help. When someone else won, we were to celebrate their success. When we won, we were to be humble.

We had a variety of employees on the farm. My dad always saw the good and potential in everyone. Every employee was paid the same per hour. Most of the employees lived with us in the farmhouse or were provided housing in the second house on the farm. The meals were provided. We ate together. There were several lean years when the employees made more per hour than my dad. A few times the sheriff would stop with someone who got into trouble that he thought needed a break. My mother would explain the rules and the consequences. My dad would offer them a job. They lived with us. As my dad worked side by side with them, he taught them to never call anyone a negative name, leave the past in the past to live in the present, stop making excuses, be who you want to be, and achieve your dreams. My dad would listen to them, and then ask a few questions to help them discover the next step on their journey. The employees, my dad, my sisters and I all took turns doing the dirty jobs and the fun jobs. No matter how urgent the work, my dad insisted that everyone stop and do something fun together every day. After planting, harvest, or a major project, my dad made time to do something that each person enjoyed. My dad complimented and appreciated everyone. A few people did little work and disappeared. My dad had no regrets and prayed that they will find their way.

Money was usually insufficient to make all the equipment upgrades we needed, so it was a great day when we purchased a new piece of equipment. Unfortunately, the equipment was usually damaged shortly after it arrived. Whether an employee, one of his children or himself, my dad never got mad. He would shrug and say, "They make sheet metal everyday." My sisters and I, all got into car accidents that totaled cars, sometimes our only family car. My dad's first concern was the health and well-being of all the people involved. He would then say, "They make sheet metal everyday." Cars and equipment can be replaced. A person is of infinite value.

These are only a few of the ways that my dad treated everyone equal and is generous, compassionate, and gracious.

Ever since I left the farm, I have regular dreams about it. This time of year, I dream of harvesting corn to make corn silage. The aroma is magnificent like the smell of husking sweet corn. The dreams are always in sync with the season, except for one dream I had on the twentieth of August, that day my sisters and I were with my dad who was under hospice care. Dad was alert. We shared stories. We told each other of our love for one another. I left to get some sleep. That morning just before I awoke, I dreamed that my dad and I were bailing hay, which happens in early July, making this dream unique, for it was out of season. It was a wonderful sunny morning. My dad was driving the bailer and I was stacking the hay. Everything was working perfectly, which almost never happens. We made one round around the field. The entire field was ready for bailing. We had all five wagons empty and ready to be stacked with bailed hay. We had all day meaning we would likely complete the harvest. I was greatly perplexed when my dad stopped the tractor and walked back to me on the wagon. With a loving smile he said it is time for me to rest. He hugged me, and then walked toward our favorite place on the farm, the 7-acre lake where we swam, ice skated, picnicked, played, laughed and had an abundance of fun. I woke up and went to visit my Dad. He was unresponsive. That afternoon friends from church came and sang two of his favorite hymns, "How Great Thou Art" and "In the Garden". A few minutes later my Dad went home to heaven. I hope I can be generous, compassionate, and gracious like my Dad. Amen