

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Phil 1:21-30; Matt 20:1-16 The Rev. Linda Spiers
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – Sept 24, 2017 Trinity Episcopal Church

Henri Nouwen says, “God is a generous giver, but we can only see and enjoy God’s generosity when we love God with all of our hearts, minds and strength. As long as we say: ‘I will love you, God, but first show me your generosity’, we will remain distant from God and unable to experience what God truly wants to give us, which is life and life in abundance.”¹

I wonder what how fairness fits into our gospel today. Is it fair for the laborers who began work at 5 o’clock to receive the same wages as workers who worked the entire day? If we roll Jesus’ parable into today’s time, I imagine that the workers would grumble, just like the ones in the parable and perhaps even more. It’s not equitable. It’s not fair. It’s unjust. What would the labor unions say?

Those last workers who began working at 5 o’clock had been looking for work all day and had been unable to find anything. There’s a place in Hartford where people go seeking a daily job. They stand in line waiting and hoping for work. Some get work and many do not. In Alexandria, Virginia, not far from where my mother lived, there were groups of undocumented people waiting on corners—waiting to be picked up for a day of construction work or a day of lawn care or a day of some other kind of work. Who knows what they were being paid under the table?

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), 145.

The generous landowner gave those workers in the parable a job and chose to give them a generous wage. This landowner gives us a little window into God's generosity, which is beyond anything that we can imagine or explain.

I wonder who those last laborers hired were. Some commentators say they were the elderly or infirmed. I wonder if they worked another job first or if they were people who had to take care of an elderly parent first or provide childcare. Were they outcast for some other reason? Parables aren't clear and invite us to wonder—wonder about the characters or the situations or how we might see ourselves in the story.

There's a rabbinic parable that's very similar to Jesus' parable in Matthew. It's from the Jerusalem Talmud, is a eulogy for Rabbi Bun bar Hiyya, and follows this way. "To what [story] may [the life of] R. Bun bar Hiyya be compared? [To this story.] A king hired many workers. One worker was excellent in his work. What did the king do? He took him and walked with him back and forth [through the rows of crops and did not let him finish his day's work]. Toward evening, when all the workers came to be paid, he gave him a full day's wages along with [the rest of] them. The workers complained and said, 'We toiled all day, and this one toiled only two hours, and he gave him a full day's wages!' The king said to them. 'This one worked [and accomplished] more in two hours than you did in a whole day.' So R. Bun toiled in the study of the Torah for twenty-eight years, [and he learned]

more than an aged student could learn in a hundred years.”²

This parable shows what God wants is not necessarily what we want or what we think is appropriate.

I think Jesus is inviting us to ponder God’s generosity on a deep level. It’s an invitation to remember all of the ways that God is generous to us and to those around us. This weekend is a profound example of the ways of God’s generosity. We’re each given gifts to do what we do and to have hearts stirred to reach out to those who need it. Mimi McGill has a great story about a Miriam’s Closet recipient this week and about the generosity of a business owner just down the road. Ask her to share that with you.

A number of you all gathered yesterday morning to make 100 bag lunches for the guests of Church by the Pond. There were children in the park yesterday and even a one-week-old baby. Folks were hungry. No questions were asked about why they were there or if they really needed a bag lunch. Most of the guests received communion, and some were present only for the lunch that followed. I offered anointing and a blessing to those who wanted it as they waited in line, and most wanted it, even if they didn’t receive communion. They were all fully accepted as God’s children, loved just as much as we are loved. People who gathered to make the lunches or to donate the food items often don’t see the fruits

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: the Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York : HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 230.

of their labor or the joy two sandwiches, an apple, cookies and a fruit bar can bring. Many don't know where their next meal will come from.

And then there is the *Holy Smoke BBQ*, where generous hearts came up with this idea years ago and have continued to make it happen. The all night cooks are the same cooks who have made it through the night with little or no sleep every time we've held the BBQ. They were spelled by the generosity of two who came at 4 a.m. who spotted an eagle watching over them in the early morning light. There were folks who made multiple shopping trips to purchase the ingredients for a meal that pleased the heart and soul of all who joined us yesterday. There was a faithful crew of people who worked in a very hot kitchen to plate the meals, runners who delivered the meals, hospitality folks who greeted strangers and Trinity folks with smiles and love. They learned about God's generosity and passed it on to all who came into our midst yesterday. Some faithful people will do the work that nobody wants to do—to clean that grill and put it away for the next time.

I think it's called living the gospel. That's what Jesus calls us to do all the time. God's generosity surpasses all of our understanding and Jesus calls us to ponder it—however we can—and to live it—however we can.