

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 23, 2017 – Summer Parables
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Matthew 20:1-15 (The Five Gospels)

FOR REFLECTION

“Generosity is giving more than you can, and pride is taking less than you need.”

- Kahlil Gibran, Sand and Foam
Lebanese-American artist / writer (1883-1931)

“Silence the angry man with love. Silence the ill-natured man with kindness. Silence the miser with generosity. Silence the liar with truth.”

- Gautama Buddha, The Dhammapada Verse 223
(c. 563 BCE/480 BCE – c. 483 BCE/400 BCE)

Being Generous

Being generous is a matter of defying expectations.

It can cut both ways – depending on your place in the equation.

A worker paid a full day’s wage for one hour’s work is likely to experience generosity with gratitude.

A worker paid a full day’s wage after working ten hours – and after seeing a person working one hour getting a full day’s wage – may feel cheated.

A long-time member of an organization may expect to hold certain positions of influence – in leadership – in decision-making.

A new member of that organization may expect to have to earn a place in leadership. There would be surprise, in either case, if that new member was immediately given a position of power.

Long-time church members might expect a certain level of pastoral care.

New members get the same level of pastoral care.

The levels may vary depending on need rather than how long one has labored for Jesus.

Just previous to this parable is the camel one:

...it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy person to get into God’s domain.

Matthew 19:24

People love the interpretation that the “needle’s eye” is a smaller gate into the city and the only way to enter is to remove all the baggage from the camel and enter on hands and knees. But there is no historical evidence that such gates existed. The impact of

the camel parable is that entrance into the City of God is not about what we have or have done – it is about God’s intentions and actions.

...a Jewish midrash records:

"The Holy One said, open for me a door as big as a needle's eye and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and [camels?]"

In other words, God only needs the sinner to open up just a crack for him and God will come pouring in and set up room for an oasis. God only needs a 'foot in the door', so to speak.

...The exaggerated and contrasted size is deliberate and is not an overt judgement on riches or poverty. Jesus reflects on how hard it often is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The riches are a distraction and hard to share if one is too attached to them. The disciples' incredulity is that if even the rich cannot be saved, who can? But the verdict is that even the rich, not only the rich, will find it impossible to save themselves – but with God all things are possible.

Midrash Rabbah, The Song of Songs, 5.3; cf. Pesiqta R., 15, ed. Friedmann, p.70a; Soncino Zohar, Vayikra 3, p95a
<http://www.biblicalhebrew.com/nt/camelneedle.htm>

And in God’s Domain, a laborer only needs to show a willingness to work for an hour – to be given a full day’s wage. Their family needs to eat too. It’s about the need, not the time of employment, one’s employment history, one’s relative prosperity or anyone’s expectations.

We have begun a tradition of giving our teens “love gifts” of \$25 each at the end of the school year. These are not earned, they are given to each teen regardless of their level of participation in activities or attendance at church. We might consider being even more generous – as each of these young humans is extraordinary in their essence, beloved of God and all of us – beyond price.

In God’s Domain, preexisting health conditions, economic and social status, good and bad choices, gender and luck have nothing to do with God’s level of concern or love for us. Health care, a living wage, access to social services are God-given rights – not earned by merit. Anything that breathes has a right to clean air, protection, sustenance, safety, affection. God gave us everything. Who are we to apportion these things out based on random criteria?

When Peter was about six I was attempting to explain to him the history of slavery in America. At some point, he stopped me and asked, “Who put the white people in charge?”

Exactly. And, I might add, why did those people – white or otherwise - choose to be so cruel?

We've been reading a wonderful book together at bedtime called Wonder by R.J. Palacio - soon to be a big screen movie. The main message is about choosing kindness. We are tempted by fear, by social pressure, by circumstances to treat others poorly, bully them, shun them, be cruel to them. Persons of true character choose to be kind and generous instead.

It's a choice we make repeatedly – when we choose whether or not to give something to the person with a sign at the end of a freeway exit – or decide how much to tip our server – when we choose to be late in order to offer assistance to a stranger – or take a lower salary in order to equalize the pay scale. Actress Emma Stone recently “revealed that her male co-stars have taken salary cuts in the past so that she could achieve equal pay...

“And that’s something they do for me because they feel it’s what’s right and fair,” Stone said. “That’s something that’s also not discussed, necessarily — that our getting equal pay is going to require people to selflessly say, ‘That’s what’s fair.’”

JULY 7, 2017 | 11:21AM PT

<http://variety.com/2017/film/news/emma-stone-male-co-stars-took-salary-cuts-1202489493/>

One of the most powerful personalities in Hollywood – who has gone through enough industry ostracization to make her bitter – is one of the most powerful promoters of generosity in our culture. She encourages and gets corporations to participate in huge give-aways to people in need – and just regular audience members. Yes, there is promotional benefit – but there is also a great amount of gratitude and joy. She ends every show with the words, “Be kind to one another.” And people who hear those words respond – by being extraordinarily kind – which she pays attention to – and reinforces with that attention. In a way, she is parenting all of us (in this culture of self-absorption and personal gain) into making better choices – choices that promote the common good.

Which is more than I can say about our national leaders right now.
Enough said.

Do any of you have stories to tell – stories of moments you've been able to be extraordinarily generous – or have been on the receiving end of such generosity?

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God's generosity knows no bounds. How are we going to choose to respond?

Matthew 20:1-15 (The Five Gospels)

1 For Heaven's imperial rule is like a proprietor who went out the first thing in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the workers for a silver coin a day he sent them into his vineyard.

3 And coming out around 9 a.m. he saw others loitering in the marketplace 4 and he said to them, "You go into the vineyard too, and I'll pay you whatever is fair." 5 So they went.

Around noon he went out again, and at 3 p.m., and repeated the process. 6 About 5 p.m. he went out and found others loitering about and says to them, "Why did you stand around here idle the whole day?"

7 They reply, "Because no one has hired us."

He tells them, "You go into the vineyard as well."

8 When evening came the owner of the vineyard tells his foreman: "Call the workers and pay them their wages starting with those hired last and ending with those hired first."

9 Those hired at 5 p.m. came up and received a silver coin each. 10 Those hired first approached thinking they would receive more. But they also got a silver coin apiece. 11 They took it and began to grumble against the proprietor: 12 "These guys hired last worked only an hour but you have made them equal to us who did most of the work during the heat of the day."

13 In response he said to one of them, "Look, pal, did I wrong you? You did agree with me for a silver coin, didn't you? 14 Take your wage and get out! I intend to treat the one hired last the same way I treat you. 15 Is there some law forbidding me to do with my money as I please? Or is your eye filled with envy because I am generous?"