

Sermon for September 20, 2020 by Pastor Hanberry "Confusion About What Generosity Looks Like" at Trinity UCC, Manchester, MD
Exodus 16:2-15 & Matthew 20:1-16 (ser20-37)

After all their whining and complaining God showers the Israelites with manna and quail from the heavens. And did you notice in the last verse of our lesson from the 16th chapter of Exodus how they responded? Confused, at best. ⁵ *"When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?""*

How often in our own lives do we not see a generosity offered us by someone, by God, and we simply do not recognize the gift? In this case in our Exodus text, the Israelites saw it but they didn't know what it was. Moses was not only a prophet and servant leader to the people, he was their interpreter of God's saving action in their lives.

In their hunger and complaining and whining, not unlike times in our own lives, the Israelites seemed so desperately frustrated that they would have been better off to have died around the "flesh pots" in Egypt. How often has your complaining and unhappiness led you in your desperation to say something like that? And if we are left alone to our own devices and are not part of a spiritual, faith community, we might very well say something like that.

One of the gifts of generosity is the gift of community, a collection of people who surround us with their love and care --- if we let them.

Certainly, during these days in which we live -Covid 19 being the new reality—we have to isolate or quarantine to stay safe. Unfortunately, one of the reasons this virus continues its attack is that people are not careful...Shall I say IT? They are not generous with their lives. Wearing a mask or face covering is NOT a political statement, but some have chosen to make it so. Wearing a mask is a moral statement, a picture of the simple generosity of helping in our little way to take care of the those around us—to live in community with each other. Wearing a mask out in public is not even a moral statement; no, it's not a statement at all, it is simply a way of living in ways, necessary for the times in which we live.

In their confusion, the children of Israel would have rather died in Egypt than live through the hard times in the wilderness with Moses and Aaron. At least that's what they are thinking as the hunger aches in their empty bellies. The thing they did, however, that brings them to a new place is to tell Moses their needs...to come to the community with all the spirit they have left and ask for help. And Moses hears them. And God hears Moses. And God responds. God is a generous God. God gives Moses to the people to guide them toward the "promised land."

We have a very different kind of confusion going on in our gospel lesson for today. The Israelites are confused about what God's generosity looks like. The laborers in Matthew are confused about what stands as the right way to treat others – even confused about returning the generosity of

their master to one of the laborer's companions. Is it fair to say that "greed" gets in the way of the laborer being generous to the other laborers?

How many times have we seen this scene played out in our own lives? In our own communities? People confused about how to "pay it forward"? People confused about what it means to participate in community life promoting the 'common good.' Jesus' declaration at the conclusion of this text is strong: "*the last will be first, and the first will be last.*" Of course, we like this statement when we see ourselves as being last and in some act of generosity we end up being first. That's a good outcome for us. However, if we see ourselves as in "first place," and we end up "last" it's not so good. And we do exactly what the laborers in the vineyard did: complain about the situation of our lives.

It is our tendency to ask this question of the text: "What is the lesson in the parable of the workers in the vineyard?" And here is what one writer says: "*The **lesson** of this **parable** is that God rewards us based upon the opportunities that God gives us. The later **workers** would have been willing to go to work earlier, but they were not given the opportunity by the employer.*" In our current circumstances in the US, we have raging and pretty unhelpful debates about people being paid by the government when out of work. This unhealthy debate has gotten mixed reviews by different people. I know this for sure: There are millions of people who just want to have the opportunity to work and earn a living in these days.

Is it fair to say that in the case of this parable by Jesus, the people who waited all day were willing to work all day? Indeed, I imagine they would have much preferred to have worked all day and earned their wages than to have to sit and wait (sometimes in the indignity of not have a regular job) for some odd job to come along at the end of the day. But given this story or parable of Jesus is about generosity, the story doesn't necessarily turn on what we might think. Let us remember: this a parable of Jesus and the point of any of Jesus' stories always goes counter to our own worldly thinking.

Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God and what that kingdom looks like—then and now. I should point out the obvious or at least remind us of what is true of Jesus' parables: they are sometimes simple and powerful and sometimes the parables are complex and confusing. I think this parable of the laborers in the vineyard lies someplace in between 'simple' and 'complex.' One writer suggests there are multiple themes and that the themes keep changing. Or one could say the themes compete with each other or tend to undermine each other.

In one commentary, we read this: "*The workers come to the vineyard at different times, and they get paid in the reverse order of when they came. Just like that, first and last reversed! Except, this great*

reversal can't really be signified by the order they cut the checks in, can it? It's a little underwhelming. Besides, if this is indeed the story's point, its characters seem to have missed the memo."

This same Bible scholar says, "I like to imagine Jesus narrating parables while volunteers from the audience act them out on the spot. Jesus suggests that this is a story about the first and last switching places, and at first the guy playing the landowner is totally on board." "Call the laborers and give them their pay," he says. He winks at Jesus. "Beginning with the last, and then going to the first." This is the early-bird workers' cue to get mad that the johnny-come-lately folks are being paid first. And they do get mad—but not about that, exactly. They think they should be paid more, not first. So the story abruptly stops being about reversing the first and the last and starts being about equality, and how people don't always like it."

Let's admit the one of the truths of this parable for us today. There is much inequality in our society. I'll not go into all the devastating data about how some groups in our world are limited by the state of their lives (the color of their skin, the sound of their accent, the part of town where they live, etc.); suffice it to say the gap between the haves and have nots is huge: compare the 1% to all the rest of us. Given all this, what is our work as the church, as followers of Jesus in these times?

For me, this story removes some of our confusion about what generosity looks like. In this case, the story is about the landowner's choice to give each worker enough to meet their needs. For this landowner, as seen by the eyes of Jesus, sharing his resources in this way removes any confusion about what Generosity Looks Like: To receive this as a gift and to give God the praise.

May that be true for you as well this day. Amen.