

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Living Open-Handed

September 24, 2023

Matthew 20.1-16

The kingdom of heaven is about generosity, God's and ours. It says so in Jesus' parable when the vineyard owner asks disgruntled workers, "Are you envious because I am generous?" or in my translation, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" The one word used to describe the vineyard owner is generous. It's how he describes himself. It's how he understands what he has done even if others don't understand it.

What has he done? Early in the morning, he hired a group of men to work in the vineyard for an agreed-upon day's wage, a coin called a denarius. Throughout the day, several times, he returned to hire more workers. Even in the last hour of daylight, he hired more workers. When the day was over, it was time to pay. He lined them up from those who had come last to those who had been there all day sweating in the heat. To those who came last, he paid a whole day's wage, which is exactly how much he paid everyone, up to and including those who'd worked all day for it which they had agreed. It's not fair, they protested. Not fair? Didn't you agree to work for this? Yes. Well, then, what is it to you if I pay the others the same? Do you begrudge me for being generous?

We know how the first ones felt: cheated. But how did the others feel about it? Pretty elated, I imagine. Pretty good, I think. It's an amazing thing to receive generosity, whether big or small.

Just the other day, I went outside, just right out here, from my office to water the veggie garden. It was about 1 pm. When I rounded a corner, I encountered a long-time pastor friend who I hadn't seen in a while. She was with four other women and immediately greeted me happily. I asked, what's brought you here? I didn't know you'd be here today. She said, "I brought my staff to learn about your children's ministry from the DaySpring staff. We want to start using Godly Play, and we learned all about that. It's been a great day." I said, "Oh, that's so great I said, I'm glad that could happen." Then, she continued, we picked up Schmaltz's sandwiches and went out back under the trees to have a picnic." I said, "Oh that's great, I forgot my lunch today. A Schmaltz sounds amazing. Maybe I'll go get one." I was already there in my mind, already in line. I snapped out of my momentary contemplation to see that she was looking at me curiously, and then she asked slightly awkwardly, "Would it offend you if I gave you half a sandwich?" Huh? "Well, I have half a sandwich I'm not going to be able to eat. Would you like it?" Sure, I said. You don't have to ask me twice to take a Schmaltz. I'm shameless. Then, leveling up her mom-quotient, she reaches down elbow-deep in her big purse, pulls out a perfectly wrapped half sandwich, and presents it to me. Now I ask you, what's better than an unexpected, undeserved Schmaltz? Manna from heaven—I ate every bite. I'm truly shameless.

Generosity is giving to others freely and abundantly. This would have been very different if she'd pulled out a half-eaten pack of crackers. It would have been fine, but this was a Schmaltz.

Generosity is giving to others freely and abundantly. We see that in the parable. I tasted it in the sandwich. I received a gift that was abundant and kind. It was friendship more than pity.

Do you think of the character of God as generous? We say God is good. We say God is gracious. Is God generous? Generosity in the parable translates as a Greek word that usually means good. it describes a tree that produces abundant, sweet fruit. That tree is good. And it's used of soil that produces abundant harvest. The soil is good. Here the vineyard owner is the same word, good, generous. It's a way of being that produces life and joy beyond justice or reasonable expectation. Generosity is delicious as I've described.

It can also be shocking, especially if it comes from someone you don't know. Years ago, our family was doing early planning for a road trip that would take us through Boston in June. I wondered if the Red Sox would be in town because I'd love to go to a game at Fenway, and the only other time I'd been in Boston they were on a road trip. So I opened my computer to check. And I prayed a very selfish and shallow prayer: God, if you exist, the Red Sox will be in town. But as I was typing, the Google search, I went even farther into heresy: if you exist, and if you love me, the Red Sox will be in town, and they'll be playing the Rangers. It was a joke, I promise. I hit return on my search. There it was: proof of God's existence worthy of any apologetics and evidence of God's love sufficient for any doubt.

Tuesday night, June 11, 2019, Rangers at Red Sox, Fenway Park! Oh wow, we got to go to Fenway to see the Rangers. And not only that, the game was bonkers: There was a moving video tribute and moment of silence for long-time favorite David Ortiz who was in the hospital at that time. I had to explain "Big Poppi" to the kids. There was an inside-the-park homerun, and both managers were tossed from the game. Rangers won. It was awesome. I think God was like: "Do I exist? Do I love you? Watch this." But even that wasn't all. On the way out of the stadium, walking to the train, a man from the crowd pointedly asks my son, do you like the Red Sox? Jimmy was decked in Ranger's gear. "Uh yeah," he said. The man says good, and like Mean Joe Green in the old Coke commercial, he tosses him a shirt off his shoulder and walks off. Jimmy unfolds it. It was a genuine, MLB-quality David Ortiz game jersey he was holding. Totally random, totally out of the blue. Totally true. I think God was like: do I exist, and do I love? I can go much farther than that. Watch what I can do. It's a memory we'll never forget.

Moses Maimonides, a 12th-century rabbi, described a ladder of charity, from the lowest rung. "To give begrudgingly" is the lowest rung, and he describes a number of steps that lead all the way up to the highest rung, which he describes as, "to hand someone a gift or a loan, or to enter into partnership with him, or to find work for him, so that he will never have to beg again." It's beyond even that gift we were given that night. It's relationship that continues on.

The word good here has the meaning of that which brings forth something that was not there before, like life, like relationship, like a future and a hope. It is not begrudging at all. It's abundant, joyful goodness. Our word generous expresses this kind of goodness. With other words like it, it shares the root "gen" which means to beget --generate, generation, genealogy. All of these words have to do with bringing life and a future where there was none before.

It's also the root for Genesis, the biblical story of origins, where we first begin to learn who God is. God is a gen-esis God, a generating God, a generous God. Creation meets human need for physical sustenance. It didn't have to be delicious. Creation meets the need for air and water. It didn't have to be beautiful. Creation meets our needs. It didn't have to also manifest its creator. But it does. When you encounter unnecessary beauty in a field of wildflowers or a starry night, or the laughter of a child, those are God's fingerprints.

God gives good things freely and abundantly and says, It is good.

If generosity is the character of God, then generosity is a virtue we are to grow in as well that we would be more like God. It's been said: "Generosity is not a random idea or haphazard behavior but rather, in its mature form, a basic, personal, moral orientation to life." Sometimes people talk about a random act of kindness, which is nice in its own way. But acts of kindness, if they are generous, are not random. They grow out of an orientation to life that's open-handed instead of closed-fisted. These are two ways to go through life—open-handed or close-fisted. How do we become more generous? By being more generous, taking one rung at a time upward on the ladder of generosity. If the only place you can start is a gift given begrudgingly, start there. You're on the ladder, but there are steps above you to grow into.

When we were young(er), a campus ministry leader at the Baptist Student Union at A&M saw the financial situation we were in. Jenny was getting close to graduation but had more books left to buy than money in the bank. I wasn't doing much better. She was scraping by as best she could but couldn't pay for books without a job and couldn't get to her job without a car. He called her over one day and said, I have a car to sell. It has a lot of miles on it, but it's a Honda so it should keep running for a while. Are you interested? She said, oh that's interesting, but I don't have money to buy a car. He said the price is good. I'll sell it to you for \$5. He did. Even a car with 200,000 miles is worth a lot more than that. He said to her, If you still have this car in a year, I'll be mad at you. It won't last that much longer. Five dollars, here's the keys.

Yet it did last---it lasted a lot longer. We married and pulled it on a trailer all the way to the east coast. It was our car for three years. It was a good car. But then the time came when we could scrape enough to buy the car we needed for the hour-long commute we faced each day. What should we do with the old Honda? There was a young couple in the church. He was from Cuba, and she was from Mexico. I'd performed their wedding in Spanish, which was a total riot. We called them over after church and said, we have a car to sell, are you interested? We don't have money to buy a car, they said. We'll make you a good deal. 4 dollars. Goodness generated from generation to generation.

We don't just flip a switch on generosity. We cultivate a spirituality of generosity like soil; it flows through us like a flowing stream. St. Bonaventure, the first Franciscan theologian, saw God as a fountain flowing with life that sprung creation into being. He described God as a "fountain fullness of love". Where did he get that idea? Well, he drew on neo-Platonic philosophical concepts of the Good, augmented with a pseudo-Dionysean metaphysic and Hugh

of St. Victor's spirituality. Sure that's where his head got it. Do you know where his heart got it? You know where his eyes got it? By watching St. Francis walk through the world. By watching a person go through life open-handed, open-hearted, kind, selfless, joyful, giving, sacrificial. That's how others saw God was through one person's life. How about you? How about us?

On the cusp of being asked to be part of a church fundraising campaign to build a building the question before us isn't how much money can you give? The first question is how do you walk through the world? If we tackle a building project, we'll each have to ask ourselves, "How much money can I give?". That's a financial question.

The spiritual question it participates in is deeper: how can I be generous? And it's not just to a building project . . . whether or not there is ever a building project. The spiritual question is "How can I be generous?" How can I grow in generosity in the way I walk in the world? How can I walk in Christ in the world?

The highest form of generosity is a shared life, not just a single act, but a life transformed into one that like God, generates, like genesis, new life, a future where there was not one before. I want to walk through life like that. I want to walk through life with people who help me become like that.

I've told three stories this morning: a sandwich pulled elbow-deep from a purse, a shirt tossed from a drunken Red Sox fan to a young Ranger's fan, and a car passed from one generation to the next. What do those all have in common? I was on the receiving end of all of them, yes, that's part of it. These are stories I told today from 5 days ago, 5 years ago, and 25 years ago. You know what stories I didn't tell? I have no idea because they didn't happen. A story of generosity is only a story because someone reached in her purse, gave a boy a gift, and passed on a blessing. A reasonable boss who pays each a fair wage is a good start, but not a Gospel parable. It's not the Gospel. It's not the abundant, gracious, generous, life-giving Gospel of our Lord. That's a different kind of story. Those are the stories we tell.

We tell stories of a God who flows love like a fountain, and a people through whom that love flows in 10,000 places—those are stories worth telling, more stories than could fill the books of the whole world.

If the kingdom of heaven has hands, they are open and extended.
 If the kingdom of heaven has hands, they are yours.
 Let us come with open hands to receive the gifts of our Lord at his table.