

## We Have a Generous God!

Pentecost 18  
Matthew 20:1-16

In different parts of the world, the legal system is drastically different. For example, in some places if two parties are disputing who is the owner of a property, the dispute is resolved based on who can show, through documentation and records, that they are the rightful owner. In other places, the dispute is resolved based on who prove occupancy and use. Drastically different! In some parts of the world, trust is tasked-based. If we do tasks together, if we complete tasks together, then trust is built. In other parts of the world, trust is relationship-based. If I know you, know your family, and know your story, then trust is built. In some parts of the world. Very different. In some parts of the world, communication is very direct. People say exactly what they mean and there are no hidden messages. In other places, communication is more layered. It's not as direct. Words or communication can contain subliminal messages. There's a difference.

Our world and our way of doing things and God's world and his way of doing things are very different. The kingdom of this world, the earthly kingdom, and God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven are drastically different!

God himself tells us that the way we think is very different from the way he thinks. He told us this through the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson, **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

And, Jesus through a story, a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, explains just how different God's ways are from our ways.

He tells this story about a landowner who hires people to work for him for the day and this landowner agrees to pay them a denarius. By the way, a denarius would have been a generous, not crazy, but a generous wage for a day's work. Then, the landowner goes out at noon and hires more workers and agrees to pay them what is right. Finally, shortly before the end of the day he sees "others standing around." It's important to understand that this concept of "standing around" doesn't mean these guys were lazy. Instead, it means they just hadn't been hired by anyone yet. In fact, these men still "standing around" after not having found work all day, probably meant they were desperate. They were probably looking for any work they could find and even though it would have been unlikely to get hired that late in the afternoon they were out there, hopeful. The landowner finds them and hires them.

Now, this is where the story gets interesting. When it's time to pay the workers, the landowner tells his foreman, **"Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."** The foreman gave the ones hired last, a denarius. He gave the ones hired in the middle of the day, a denarius. He gave the ones hired first, as promised, a denarius. This goes totally against our way of thinking. It went against the way of thinking of the people in Bible times. In fact, the workers who worked all day grumbled when they saw that those who worked only one hour earned the same amount.

But, the landowner did this on purpose. If he wanted to avoid this situation, he would have simply paid workers he hired first, first. Then, they would have been walking away or gone when he paid the workers hired in the middle of the day. Then, after those workers were paid and walking away, he would pay the workers hired last. It would have been more discreet. But the landowner gave the foreman

specific instructions. He wanted the last to be paid first and the first to be paid last. He wanted the workers to see his generosity. God wants us to know about his generosity.

There are a lot of misunderstandings about the Christian faith and some of these misunderstandings can creep their way into the church and even into our minds. One of the common misunderstandings is that because of our hard work, our obedience, our sacrifice, our faithfulness, our putting in the time... that because of the things we do... we deserve God's favor or attention or even a place in heaven. Another misunderstanding is that our relationship with God is transaction. If we do this for God, then he will do this for us. Another, related, misunderstanding is that God is or should be fair. According to this mentality, someone who has been a believer all their life, always went to church, didn't fall into major sins should be rewarded more than someone who comes to faith shortly before their death after living a mostly non-Christian life.

Those misunderstandings spring up when we try to understand who God is based on what makes sense in our world. And those misunderstandings are also dangerous. Because we could never be obedient enough, work hard enough, or put in enough time to earn eternal life. As sinful, human beings, we could never successfully negotiate or barter forgiveness with a holy and perfect God who knows every single one of our thoughts, has seen everything we have done, and heard everything we have said. And, if God was really fair, he would punish us for breaking his law.

Jesus, in this parable, teaches us that God is drastically different from what we think is normal. God gives a denarius unconditionally to each and every person he has called to work in his vineyard regardless of when they were called.

God doesn't give us what we deserve, and that's called mercy. **"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities (Psalm 103:10)."** Mercy. In fact, he gives us what we don't deserve, and that's called grace. He gives us faith in our hearts, the forgiveness of our sins, the righteousness of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, communion with him, eternal life – all of these riches, he gives us. Grace. God, in a way that goes beyond our understanding and comprehension, is generous.

He is generous because of Jesus.

Imagine the bitterness Jesus could have experienced, the grumbling he could have uttered. He left his Father's throne in heaven to come to earth. He kept God's laws perfectly in thought, words, and actions. He never sinned! He went from place to place healing, preaching, and teaching, showing kindness and love to all. What reward did he receive for his labor? It wasn't a denarius. It was death. He was sentenced to death in an unfair trial that was filled with false accusations. He was crucified like a common criminal. Yet he never uttered a word of complaint despite all the injustice and unfairness imposed upon him. After he rose from the dead, he didn't complain about how hard it was. Instead, he said, "Peace be with you."

God, being unfair to Jesus, allows him to treat us with mercy and gives us his grace. The injustice that our Heavenly Father showed toward his own Son resulted in our salvation. We don't have a God who is going to provide us with spiritual compensation based on years of service or commensurate with experience. We don't have a God who is transactional. We don't have a God who is fair. We have so much more. Someone so much better. We have a generous God!

This parable reminds us that it's not about what we give to God, it's about what God gives to us. This parable would be especially comforting for someone on their deathbed, who, although clinging to faith in Jesus, maybe did spend most of their life as a believer. In a similar way, this parable would make a good funeral sermon text for anyone and especially for the funeral of a person who was called to faith shortly before being called home to heaven. This parable may be a good reminder, perhaps even for us, especially if we ever start to think too highly of ourselves. It should remind us that serving in the Kingdom is a privilege and it's not supposed to be a chore. This parable helps drive home what the Lutheran church stands for, a God of mercy and grace, who gives freely. This parable reminds us just how different the kingdom of heaven is from the kingdom of this world. It comforts us with the good news that we have a generous God!