The Sum of Gratitude

By Jeff McDowell

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Horseheads First UMC

Sermon theme: Often our default human setting is, “It’s not fair,” and “God doesn’t care!” In today’s readings we see this attitude front and center as the Israelites whine in the desert and the farm workers whine about unfair pay rates. Both groups are missing the point of God’s generosity to all. Manna and quail were provided to Israel’s children freely to satisfy the thousands of people, with enough left over to eat on the sabbath day. In Jesus’ parable everyone made a fair day’s wage, even though some worked more hours than others. The sum of a self – focused exchange is we always want more than we have been given. The sum of a thankful heart is grace and peace, even if one works harder than others. In the economy of God, there is more than enough love, grace, mercy and providence to go around. Are you thankful or angry about your lot in life?

Scriptures: Exodus 16:2-3, 9-15 & Matthew 20:1-16

**Exodus 16:2-3, 9-15**

**2**The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. **3**The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’ **9**Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.”’ **10**And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. **11**The Lord spoke to Moses and said, **12**‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”’ **13**In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. **14**When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. **15**When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

**Matthew 20:1-16** ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. **2**After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. **3**When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; **4**and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. **5**When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. **6**And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” **7**They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” **8**When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” **9**When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. **10**Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. **11**And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12**saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” **13**But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? **14**Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. **15**Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” **16**So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Two weeks ago, Jesus’ famous words in Matthew chapter 18, on being reconciled to one another in the church.

In Matthew 18, this little instruction on how to change the world from the inside out. “if your brother sins against you….” Let me tell you, if every Christian carried out Matthew 18 to the letter, we would have a powerful witness to the world.

1. First, go to him. In fact, in another place, Jesus says if you give your gift at the altar and realize you are not reconciled with your brother, leave you gift, go reconcile, then return to offer your gift to God. Life is too short to let grudges build up. A root of bitterness only gives you bad breath and indigestion!
2. If the person who sinned against you will not hear you then take 2 or 3 from the church, so there will be no mistake about what is said. Remember the goal is total reconciliation.
3. If still the person resists your attempts to reconcile, tell it to the church.

Usually, human nature leads us to do this in the reverse, but these steps must be done in this order! If we all did this, God’s church would be extremely healthy!

That Sunday, I said: Life in God’s reign means:

WE CAN NEVER ACHIEVE TOTAL JUSTICE. ONLY GOD CAN! AND MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT: GOD WILL ACHIEVE TOTAL JUSTICE ONE DAY!

The way of peace and reconciliation is the way of Christ at every turn. His own death on the cross was the sign of reconciliation between God and humanity. We can do no less than follow his example.

Then last Sunday, we took the question of Peter in Matthew 18:

***“How many times should my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Even up to Seven Times?”***

At that time I shared the Hebrew prayer recited on the Eve of

Yom Kippur. It says:

"I extend complete forgiveness to everyone who has sinned against me, whether physically or monetarily, or spoke *lashon hara* (negative speech) about me or even false reports. And (I also forgive them) for any damages, whether on my body or my property, and for all sins between a man and his fellow ***except for*** money which I can claim in a court of law ***and except for*** someone who sins against me saying, "I will sin against him and he will forgive me". ***Except for these*** I grant complete forgiveness and no person should be punished on my account. ***And just as I forgive everyone so should You grant me favor in the eyes of all men that they should completely forgive me."***

**Forgiveness is a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense. It means to let go and let God deal with the offender!**

**Forgiveness Is:**

* Based on the Hebrew practice of the Year of Jubilee, when all land reverts to its former owners; all debts are forgiven, and all indentured servants are set free!
* Modeled by Christ on the cross (the ultimate, full, and final forgiveness)
* Christian Duty out of love for Christ
* Prayed every week in the Lord’s prayer.

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Peter is here in this sanctuary today. Jesus says: ***Peter, listen to me! Not 7 times… which you think is generous enough! But 70 times 7. The same measure that you forgive your Christian brother or sister from the heart, will be the measure I use on you!!!***

**OUCH OUCH OUCH! In the reign of God, things are not as easy as we first thought!**

**Romans 14:10-12**

10Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” ***12So then, each of us will be accountable to God.***

Kingdom justice. Kingdom economy. Kingdom politics. Kingdom relationships. Kingdom fellowship. Kingdom Come on earth, as it is in heaven. What exactly are we seeking in the person of Jesus Christ? What do we hope to gain from coming to church; being part of the church? Why do we read the Bible and pray?

It is time we ask ourselves what it is we expect to gain from this thing called Christian discipleship; What it means to follow Jesus; What it means to hope that one day, all sorrow and suffering shall flee away?

It is clear to me that when we join the church, when we become saved, when we profess our faith in Jesus Christ, ***we call him Lord and Savior***. Most of us are more comfortable making him **Savior**. But we don’t quite understand what it means that he **is Lord: Lord of our life**, and Lord of all the world.

Enter Jesus: Chapter 20 of Matthew. He explains it all. In today’s passage he is answering questions from disciples, who seem to genuinely want to know how to follow him. He also has been answering questions from the Pharisees, who as usual are putting him to the test to see if he is from God, or whether he will blaspheme the God they serve.

Jesus responds again in this place, with parables. Stories. Word pictures about every day life which points to higher truths. This particular parable is preceded by and followed up by this statement: “The Last will be first and the first will be last.” The Reign of God (the place where God is in charge) is like this:

 A vineyard owner wake up at the crack of dawn, and hired men who were standing around idle, to come work in his field for a fair day’s wage. But as the day went on, he found he needed more help. So he went out and found more men at about 9 in the morning. Then again he decided to hire more men, and they started working at Noon, then more again at 3:00 and more again at 5:00. The work day was going to end at around 6:00 p.m.! When the vineyard owner, anxious to get his crop in and begin the process of pressing the grapes for his winemaking, he paid everyone the same day’s wage! Maybe he wanted them all to return gladly the next day. Maybe he was eccentric. Maybe he was an idiot with his money. Nevertheless, whose decision was it? When the men hired at the crack of dawn whined and complained that it was unfair, the vineyard owner replied, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil, always looking to have for yourself, what you see your fellow man have? Are you envious because I am generous?

 So the last will be first, and the first will be last, said Jesus.

God’s standards are not those of a strict reward for services rendered, so that none of us has a claim as of right on his goodness. More specifically, this follows as a discussion of rewards in chapter 19:27-29:

“Peter says, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. ***What then shall we have?”***

Jesus answers him, “every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name’s sake will receive a hundred – fold, and inherit eternal life. But many that are first will be last, and the last first.”

The rewards God gives are not calculated based on equal work for equal pay. It seems unfair. It seems God is more loving and merciful and grace – giving than many of us are comfortable with. OUCH!

God’s grace the undeserving should be , should be a cause for joy, not for jealousy.

It would so easy for God to simply tell us what to do. If everything were spelled out for each day, how simple life would be. Imagine going to your door every morning when you awake and receiving a letter from God to you, telling you what to wear, when to leave for work, who to speak with and who to avoid, when to return home, and even how many groceries to buy. How easy life would be then! But friends, would any of us obey him then? Would we feel a part of our own destiny?

Jesus tells a parable in the context of

The literal translation of the word for “are you jealous?” is “is your eye

evil?” In other words, “are you looking with evil in your heart, at the reward offered to another, which has nothing to do with you?”

v. 15, “When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “what is it?” For they did not know what it was.”

That means that the exodus people are now sustained and nourished by a question, “What is it?” Maybe this is an incomplete question. Maybe it should be, “What is it that God is doing?” Maybe by paying attention to what is happening around them on a regular basis, they could learn to see God at work, even when things get difficult. And they certainly will for those folks wandering in the desert. And for us too, come to think about it.

As an aside, you might note that while the whining spoke of remembering bread in the presence of meat, God decided to provide meat in addition to the bread: meat at twilight, in the form of quail that would settle within their reach, and bread in the morning, formed like dew on the ground. “What is it?” seems a perfectly logical question.

How do we labor in the Lord’s vineyard without feeling like we are owed something, but simply enjoying the service and the connections that it brings us? Settling in for the long haul, in this faith journey, is to acknowledge that much of what we’ve learned about how the world works doesn’t fit us anymore. Jesus comes along and turns everything upside down. And what a glorious way to live it is.