

Our Envy and God's Generosity

Preached by the Rev'd Gordon Chastain, priest associate, on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 September 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16.

In another parish, a lifelong and devoted churchman once told me that he hated this gospel because it sounded so unfair that those guys who worked all day got no more than the ones who worked just a few minutes. In my book that means the story indeed does what it is supposed to do, what Jesus intended for it to do. We enter into the story and find ourselves identifying with the grumblers, the people who said it wasn't fair. And if we get that far, maybe we will also be carried along to the ending where we find out the story is not about fairness after all. It's about generosity. The punch line comes when the landowner says, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Maybe we could understand the story better if we read it this way: An employer went out in the morning and hired some workers for \$500 a day. That sounds fairly generous, doesn't it? Particularly at a time of almost 10 percent unemployment. Then if the employer hired some more workers at 4 p.m. and paid them \$500, it wouldn't be fair. But it would be very generous. Both groups of employees would have received generosity. Both groups would be a heck of a lot better off at the end of the day than they were at the beginning. And yet some might still complain.

Have you ever noticed that there seems to be no necessary connection between how well off folks are and how satisfied they are? This is such a commonplace observation that it seems trite to say. And yet every once in a while we do come across someone who has extremely poor health or who has had a lot of troubles or who is flat broke and yet says, "I am so grateful. God has been good to me." And on the other hand, I'm sure we also know people who seem to have it made. They are financially sound; they are healthy; they are graced with good looks; and they are never satisfied. Something is always wrong.

What do I make of this? That life *is* unfair. If we look for unfairness, we're always going to find it. And we're going to find it in very personal ways. This world just simply does not run on a rewards and punishment basis. It's not like our mommies and daddies told us it would be. Some people get away, literally, with murder. And good people do suffer and die.

But life is also the very meaning of generosity. This week I reread one of my favorite books, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. After describing in detail the incredible intricacy and complexity of the natural world, she says, "This then is the extravagant landscape of the world, given, given with pizzazz, given in good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over." [p. 149]

We didn't deserve to be born. We actually don't deserve anything. What have I done to deserve the sunshine and rain which makes things grow to satisfy my hunger? What have I done to merit the brain and language and self-consciousness that make me human? And if we look into the blackness of our own hearts, we know how we have fouled our humanity. Yet we live. God has not zapped us for our failures. The sun shines. The leaves

turn into beautiful jewels in the fall. We laugh and enjoy even through or in the midst of tears. And if we listen closely we can hear God saying to us as the landowner said in the story, “Are you envious because I am generous?”

Jesus tells stories like this to help us understand what God’s Kingdom is like, what God’s dream is of how this world is to run and how it will run in the end. So now we know that the ground rule of God’s Kingdom is not fairness: it is generosity. That thought set me to do some dreaming of my own this week—dreaming, imagining what a world run on generosity instead of fairness might look like.

It would look like an end to our squabbles over how to fix the economy because those squabbles are all about everyone screaming, “It isn’t fair.” It isn’t fair if you raise my taxes. It isn’t fair if you limit my Medicare. In a world run on generosity, we would all be doing what John F. Kennedy envisioned: “Ask not what the country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” Ask not what’s in it for me, but ask instead what can I do for you.

In a world run on generosity we would not be threatened by immigration. We would be again be saying, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

In a world run on generosity, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor and the twenty-two percent of children living in poverty in this country would be unthinkable.

In a world run on generosity, we would not let the fact that millions are starving in East Africa, and particularly in Somalia, go off the radar screen of our attention.

In a world run on generosity, churches would be operating on the basis of abundance and trust instead of on scarcity and worry about survival.

Can you imagine such a world? Or are you thinking it is only a dream? Are you thinking that, since we can’t even get the world to run on fairness, generosity is impossible? Ah, yes—but what a dream it is. And it is God’s dream.

This morning we are witnessing a baptism, we are bringing one more precious human being into the community that nourishes and keeps alive God’s dream of outpouring generosity. The catechism in the back of the Prayer Book defines Baptism as “the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.” Today Kyle Lee becomes an inheritor of God’s kingdom, an inheritor of the dream of the God who continually challenges us with the question: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

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