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Matthew 19:16-20:16

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Generosity

Summer of Stories – our series for this season. The scriptures are full of stories. People love to tell stories because they help us understand ourselves and the world around us. They can also encourage us and fortify us in moments when questions and doubts paralyze us. Stories can also challenge us to think differently, to look at our world and ourselves in a different light. The parables that filled Jesus’s ministry in Galilee and the surrounding rural areas were not just stories that helped encourage the day laborers and peasants of Galilee, but they were stories that helped people who had been used to seeing God in a particular way begin to think a little more expansively about who God really is.

From August 2011 to July of 2012, I worked and learned in Lesotho with Mennonite Central Committee. Each Sunday, I went to church with my host family at the local Maphutseng Evangelical Church. The entire service was in Sesotho, the native language of the people there, but the order of the service was similar to services here in America. Toward the end of the service, like here at Hutterthal, was their offering time. There was no plate passing or reverent silence. Three people would walk to the front with the church collection bag, and they would begin calling out local village names. If anyone was attending church that morning from that village, they were expected to start a song. After the first line was sang, the church would continue to sing until everyone from that village had walked to the front with their monetary offering and returned to their seat. If it was a larger group in church, this time in the service

might take 45 minutes. These men and women would not just walk to the front, no; they would dance their way to the front in rhythm with the particular song and then continue to dance their way back to their seats. Once everyone in that village would sit down, the song would slowly come to an end, the offering collectors would call out what had been given, and then they would call another village name, and the process would begin again. What was amazing about this time was how generosity was expressed. Generosity, for these Basotho people, was shown in their monetary gifts, big or small, but it was also shown in the generosity of energy and song as each community was allowed its chance to share with their neighbors and friends. Generosity is not only measured by the amount of money that we donate or graciously give to a particular organization or institution or person. We have gifts, talents, resources, expertise, experience, time, and energy that can also be graciously given and received within our church community.

I selected these two experiences from Matthew 19 & 20 because I wanted to explore how these stories help us better understand the generosity of God's kingdom in the midst of our own brokenness. I included more than just the parable in chapter 20 because both the conversation and the parable end with the same line, called *the great reversal*: "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first." Finally, these scriptures drew my interest because the conversation between Jesus and the young man is written in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels, but the parable only occurs in the book of Matthew. As I said last week, my goal in this sermon series is not to do a lengthy analysis of each detail in the story. My attempt each week is to highlight particular pieces that I notice as I read and experience these scriptures. Each of us, when we listen to or read a story, notices different parts, so receive my thoughts and compare them to your own.

In these two stories, I noticed the questions most. We can learn a lot by listening to people's questions. The young man's questions in 19:16-20 reveal a yearning to know and

experience God but also a strong sense of self-righteousness. Jesus, as any first-century rabbi would have, responds initially to the young man's questions with another question and a simple, obvious Jewish covenant response: "keep the commandments." The young man needs more, almost needs to prove his good standing in God's covenant, but he may or may not have noticed which commandments that Jesus had left out when he listed them for his second question. Jesus left out the first three commandments about holding God as primary in one's life, as the only one to be worshipped. Jesus also added the commandment that summarizes all of the rest: love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus's answer highlights what he had warned about much earlier in Matthew's gospel in the sermon on the mount: you cannot serve both God and money, a truth embodied well in the dismay and downcast face of the rich young man as he walks away.

Now we look at the questions that the disciples ask Jesus. If it is this difficult for the rich to become a part of God's kingdom, then how can anyone be saved? In the first-century, people with status and wealth were seen as successful and blessed by God, a belief that we have carried with us in some ways today. We follow the rich in our society with cameras and reporting; we read their books and life experiences as if their wealth reveals their secret knowledge or wisdom that we lack; in the American church, we often, not always, look with respect and even honor to those pastors of mega-churches as blessed by God in their ministries. Jesus's response reinforces the difficulty required for rich people to leave everything and follow him, but he does not say that they cannot because "with God, all things are possible," even if someone's devotion to their wealth and possessions has left them disconnected from God.

The disciples, though, are not much more understanding than the young man. Their second question reveals how in-grained their assumptions are about who is first and last in the kingdom. Just as the young man needed Jesus's approval and affirmation of his present life

situation, so the disciples ask the same searching question. They have left everything, so what will they have that is any better than what this rich young man already possesses? Jesus's response leads us into the second story.

In the first century, day-laborers waited each morning in a single place in their villages for landowners to come and hire them. Payment for a day's work, from 6am to 6pm, was a denarius. In this particular story, the landowner hires his first workers at 6am, agreeing with them that they will receive a denarius at end of day. Now, maybe the harvest in the vineyard is too ripe or ripening too quickly, or maybe the landowner is curious to see how many day-laborers are available, so the landowner goes to the village again at 9am, noon, 3pm, and 5pm, just one hour before the work-day ends. The landowner's question to the still-waiting workers should sound very familiar to us: "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They are entirely dependent on local landowners, and no one else seems to need help today. Each time then that the landowner goes to the village, he hires more workers. For those hired later in the day, the landowner has agreed to pay them what is right. Day-laborers were most at risk of poverty in the first-century. Servants were cared for by their masters, at least with clothes and food to eat, but day-laborers were entirely dependent on someone else.

When the day is over at 6pm, and the landowner's manager calls the workers in from the vineyard, the manager starts with the workers who have just started the day only an hour prior. The manager gives them a full-day's wage, one denarius, for that one hour. Each other worker gets the exact same thing, even the ones who started earliest in the day. Rightly so, our sense of justice is inflamed. This is not fair. The earlier workers deserve more. The worker's point out the manager's unfair payment. Again, the landowner's questions are most revealing. Did you not

agree with me for a denarius? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous?

The landowner may have given one denarius to each worker because he was looking out for these day-laborers, acting as a kind of private first-century economic safety net. A day's wage was only enough to keep a family existing, so the landowner might be doing what the covenant law has required: caring for the most vulnerable. Should we contrast the landowner with the rich young man, who was not willing to seek God first and take care of his neighbors?

Maybe this parable should be interpreted as an allegory for those who come to salvation, that it does not matter how late in life someone comes to believe in and follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior because God is generous and gracious, allowing forgiveness and inclusion even for those who come into the fold in their final hours. Would we feel some sense of injustice that God allowed someone to join in the kingdom even after they had spent many years working actively against God's purposes, working for their own gain at others' expense?

Maybe what we really don't want to admit is how these stories show how gracious God truly is. Because if we did, we would have to admit how much we are like the rich young man, convinced that we are righteous in our own standing. Yet Jesus's teaching and way shows us day by day as we follow him how we have missed the point, how we have become blind to our own lacking. Rather than receiving the gracious and generous payment for a day's work with gratitude, we find ourselves arguing with God for more, asking "What do I lack?" Maybe what we need this 4th of July, rather than a heavy dose of American exceptionalism and a celebration of how we have built this great nation ourselves, is a much larger sense of gratitude and grace, an inspiring sense of God's generosity because the first will be last, and the last will be first.