Springfield Presbyterian Church

September 24th, 2023

A Life of Generosity

1. Entering the Text

This week’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew is one that has

that familiar ending, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” We also hear this phrase in a passage in Luke, spoken again by Jesus, and it speaks to the equality of the Kingdom. This is a beautiful sentiment when we think about a glorious place where the elite and impoverished will be no more. The poor and healthy will be on the same playing field. All will be equal.

That sounds great. That sounds fair and equal and just. But...hold on. Before we let that phrase stand on its own, we need to sit with the challenge that is the text, because, at least for me, what is happening doesn’t feel so equal.

So, in modern language, the imagery I can draw out for you in America would be day laborers. I’m not sure what it looks like in Sykesville, but I remember growing up in an area with many Hispanic families. Every morning, at the crack of dawn, they would be near the benches at the local Acme and hope for a job. A passerby would need help loading something up, breaking down lumber, moving things place to place. The day laborer often lives day to day, and works very hard. Again, they are there at the break of dawn – hoping to catch that break.

So, can you imagine, when one of these men is working all day in heavy and grueling work, and another day laborer comes in at the last hour and gets the same pay? Imagine yourself in the scene – imagine your back-breaking work and sweat pouring down and you hear that this guy is going to get the same amount of money are you are. Maybe it is a generous move on the employer, perhaps he has the money to do that – but if I’m up at 6 am doing this work, I’m not going to feel so generous about this other laborer.

It doesn’t feel fair. I’d dare to say – it isn’t fair, it is not equal – at least with the human framework we have. So when I read this passage today – you can call me a curmudgeon – but the last phrase of the “first shall be last and the last shall be first” doesn’t seem so great for the one who was there first. The faithful laborer who has worked an honest days work shouldn’t be last. It isn’t right. It is not just.

1. It isn’t fair

I sat with this passage for a while, because I like to think of God

as fair and just and it didn’t make sense to me. How can a just God let this happen?

So, we have to dig deeper. The first laborer is faithful from the start, the commentary will tell us that the phrase is really a deeper sense of the Kingdom of God. For instance, if you are faithful from day one, since your very baptism – you are on the same plain as someone who commits to Jesus in their last breath. It is lovely on the surface, but there’s something difficult here to swallow.

Jesus is then saying, the person who went ahead and committed awful acts, was totally unkind, was a bully – but then had a sudden change of heart in their last days – they are going to get the same red carpet Heavenly treatment? Here’s the tough part to hear – yes, that’s exactly what Jesus is saying.

1. Just and Fair

I don’t like it, but here’s the kicker – it does not matter whether I

like it or not. I am not God. I do not know the heart and spirit of every person. I, of course, empathize with the day laborer who has been there from the beginning because I know there have been times where my faith and belief have held me to do the right thing, even in times where I haven’t wanted to. And sure, I’m not perfect, I’ve sinned, but I’ve been here from my baptism.

Yet, Jesus is much better than me – thank God. We know that God made a covenant with God’s people in Scripture, but there was never a covenant that said, “life will be fair and just and to your liking.” That never happens. God says something more to the effect of, “things will happen beyond your understanding and I promise to be with you.” God’s justice is not our justice. We live in the space of being human and finite and can only see a small portion of what is going on – whereas God’s Kingdom stretches beyond the expanse of all of our understanding. Here’s another hard, but wonderful invitation to say, “God, you are God, and I am not. I live in the mystery, I submit to a mystery that is greater than my understanding.”

Is that easy? No. But the life if faith was never crafted to be easy. But here’s the good news, in the midst of the challenges of the text – God’s grace and mercy for people is not conditional.

That means, when we stray, when we come and confess our sins, when we are unfair or unjust – we can come before God and seek forgiveness. God does not ask questions, God does not say our forgiveness is conditional upon a tally of the good and bad things we do on every given day. Just like the waters of baptism – water washes over us, we are clean, we are forgiven – do we deserve it? In the human sense? No, but God’s love is generous. God’s grace is generous and kind. It is a generosity that we can seek to live into as we are generous to others, but there is a goodness in knowing that we will never be able to touch the beauty that is God’s love.

1. Sitting with the text

At the end of the day, I need to be honest with you – does my human understanding of what is fair or not fair make it hard to hear this text? Yes. I don’t know if I can understand a generosity like this from a human place – but here’s the great news. Even when we are uncomfortable with a text, even when we do not understand it or struggle with it – God is here to stand with us in the muck.

I hope that I never depart from my faith, but if I did, there’s something incredible in finding that God’s love would override that time where I strayed. We see it in so many Scripture lessons – like the prodigal who runs home, like the lost sheep being found – God will continue to search and seek us out, even when we’ve lost our way.

Again, I read the text as the laborer who has been on site all day – but for the one who has just shown up – what good news this is for them. We do not know their story, but God does. God’s generosity cannot be measured in number or any other variable – because God’s grace is immeasurable. God has room for the one who whispers, “I believe” in their last breath. And that can be challenging for you or for me, but it does not forsake the reality that God’s goodness lives on.

Friends, wherever we land on the metaphor of this text and texts like it, I hope the generosity of God is an encouragement rather than a hinderance. I understand that each and every one of us will hear it differently, but the primary result is hopefully gratitude. Gratitude that God is God and we are not. Gratitude that God’s love and mercy and generosity is far beyond our human capacity. Gratitude that God is able to see what we may not be able to see – that all are called beloved and are welcomed home. If that is not good news, in the end, I am not sure what is.

So, may these words challenge you if they need to, may they lead you to prayer, make you think and rethink about what is just and unjust, and may they let you lean into God’s grace and mercy more and more each day. Alleluia and amen.