

Sixteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): Outsized Generosity  
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Phil. 1:21-30; Matt. 20:1-16  
September 19-20, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The avocado's pit and the giraffe's neck – what do they have in common?? Kinda surprisingly outsized, right? Like God's love. Generous beyond all reason. So generous it's almost beyond belief – except that seeing is believing!

I think despite our appreciation of others' generosity, most of us want to earn what we receive. Some of you have heard this story before, but I'm going to tell it again because it fits today's Gospel so well. It was toward the end of my second year of seminary. A faculty member got in touch to ask me to usher at the award ceremony. I apologized that I couldn't because I had another commitment. She said I needed to change my plans. I was confused but she was insistent, so I made other arrangements and showed up to usher. A preaching award was announced, and my name was called to come forward. I was in a panic. There was something wrong. I hadn't submitted a sermon for the contest. I was sure they'd gotten their records mixed up from the prior year and a terrible mistake was being made. As I crossed the dais and reached my preaching prof I whispered all this to him, lightning-quick. He smiled, handed me the reward and whispered back, "Mary, never question grace."

I never found out how all that happened, but over these past 34 years I've never forgotten Dr. Jim Forbes' wisdom, "Mary, never question grace." Most of what I've achieved academically I worked hard for, but in this instance I had to acknowledge I received what I didn't earn. I couldn't take any credit. I could only accept the gift.

That's where I stand with God, too. I can't take any credit for my salvation. I can only accept the gift of God in Jesus, my Lord.

This weekend's Gospel is actually a great lead-in to Reformation weekend at the end of October, when we'll recall again that we're **saved by grace, through faith, apart from the works of the law**. In other words: we could never be sorry enough, we could never do enough penance, we could never give enough restitution, we could never perform enough good works to be forgiven of our sins. Forgiveness isn't a **reward** we **earn**. It's a **gift** we **receive**. It's the gift God gives through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, a **free** gift we could never merit and can only receive with open, grateful, joy-filled hearts.

We nod our heads and give lip service to this bedrock belief that we are saved by grace: grace, the unmerited love of God that comes as gift and not reward. We're willing to receive that outsized generosity of God for ourselves, but may not be so sure about others. We're supposed to give as we have received, but then we get balled up by comparisons between "us" and "them." This takes us right into the messiness and challenge of today's Gospel.

We're here in virtual worship so we may be tempted to feel quiet resentment toward those who aren't. We may feel like the workers who arrived at dawn and worked faithfully till the stars appeared (the usual work day in Jesus' times), and feel gypped when the boss pays the guys who arrived at dinnertime and barely broke a sweat the same amount he gave us who arrived before breakfast and worked like slaves through the entire day. We want some semblance of fairness, justice, equity. Equal pay for equal work, but not equal pay for 2 hours vs. 12.

The landowner won't listen to that kind of whining, though. He's very no-nonsense:

*"Friend [which some say is more like, "Hey, Bud!"], I am doing no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* (Matthew 20:13-15)

"Are you jealous because I am generous?" Well, yeah, we **can** be. Our jealousy may be expressed as silent steaming, muttered disgruntlement or outright outrage! It boils down to the fantasy that we are more deserving than others, even though St. Paul points out quite clearly:

*We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* (Romans 3:23)

We want to respond, "Yes, I've sinned, but not as terribly as the next guy. I haven't murdered anyone. I haven't embezzled millions of dollars and drained other people's pension funds. I haven't cut costs on a construction project by buying subpar materials and caused a building or a bridge to collapse, with major casualties." Maybe you can even say, "I haven't cheated on my spouse. I haven't even cheated on my tax return." But even then, we are light years away from being righteous in our own right. We are still in the same spiritual Titanic along with Judas, Hitler, Stalin, John Wayne Gacy, ready to go down unless rescue arrives from the outside. It is **undeniably** true that:

*We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

Hopefully our lives show "faith active in love." But that's not because we're climbing a ladder of righteousness or scaling the walls to Heaven. It's our grateful response, our joyful passing along of the love of God with which we've been so abundantly blessed! It's our poor imitation of the overflowing generosity of our God, our mirroring of the compassion of Christ, our Savior, our living, loving Lord.

“To give and not to count the cost” is our calling. We’re **all** receiving far more than we deserve, far more than we ever could have earned. So we need to stop making comparisons. Apologies to the accountants among us, but in his book *The Parables of Judgment*, Robert Farrar Capon writes, “Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> In other words: none of us deserves **anything** from God, no less “more” because we worship more frequently, volunteer more hours, have been a member longer, are a cradle Lutheran, have only been married once....

We’re all sinners, Heaven knows, so the generosity of God (toward others, at least) will certainly drive the bean counter in us crazy! But let’s counteract that tendency by remembering William Wordsworth’s wisdom:

Give all thou canst; high heaven rejects the lore  
of nicely-calculated less or more....

And let’s remember there’s only one proper response to God’s surprising generosity:

“Don’t question grace” – and don’t withhold grace from anyone else.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1989), 55.

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