

# GIFT, GRATITUDE & GRACE

Matthew 20: 1-16

When I started out in ministry in the 1990s, I got a part-time gig as assistant minister in a downtown church in Montreal, Quebec. Even as the city was largely French-speaking, there was a wealthier English-speaking community around the church in an area called 'Westmount,' where a lot of old stock English, Scottish and Irish families lived. Some of these folk were involved in the church and were leaders in it. Everything we did in that church was about tradition. From the worship service, the procession of the choir, the way communion was served, to the way the ushering was done, everything was choreographed and the rules for serving were strict, down to what people had to wear. Some of the women began to rebel. No one was going to tell them what they had to wear in terms of colours or dress, and especially not men.

On the one side was the head usher, someone who lived for order and decorum. The very reputation of the church was on the line if people didn't fall into line. To become an usher and to do anything publicly in the church you had to be asked. You had to earn your way. It was not a right but a privilege, one that held great value and honour.

On the other side was an elder who was also outspoken. She took it upon herself to represent women and others who knew their rights to wear what they liked and do what they did as they chose to do it. The only problem with this person was that she was abrasive, demanding and easily offended. Even some of the women felt her approach was a bit too much. Serving was a privilege, not a right, and a demanding attitude was not the best approach to create better understanding and cooperation. I can tell you that even though the women finally got their way, as they rightly should have, there was a bitter taste in the mouth of many folk. Somehow the gift and gratitude involved in serving within the church had degenerated into a battle over rights and privileges, who earned or deserved them, who did not, and what each person was entitled to.

If you earn something, claim it as an entitlement you deserve or a right you possess, it is no longer a gift. And if what you are given is not a gift, then there is no need to offer any gratitude for it. You don't say thank you for something you've earned. You don't feel grateful for something that's yours by right. If you're entitled to something from someone it cannot be a gift. The problem is that love has to be a gift in order to be love. It has to be given freely from the heart beyond any calculation as to who deserves what and how much. Love has to be given freely and from the heart beyond any right anyone is entitled

to. And, if serving isn't done out of love as a gift with a heart full of gratitude, hasn't it lost its true value?

Here's another story. In my previous congregation our mission committee determined that a real need in the community was a summer day camp. After a lot of discussion and mobilization of support, we decided to go for it. We also got the support of neighbouring churches so that it was an ecumenical project.

We hired staff and a director. After 20 years this camp is still going strong. Not only did we welcome a number of children from within the broader community; we also developed a leader-in-training program for younger teens, and provided good employment for 7 older youth and young adults. Initially, we hired everyone on a salaried basis. That meant everyone worked a 40-hour week. But it was also understood that they were responsible for completing the work however long it took. At some point, though, some of the staff were complaining that some of them were staying long after doing extra cleaning. Could they be paid extra for the extra time? Soon enough, all the staff were clocking their hours hoping that everything past 40 hours would be paid as overtime.

Finally, the board felt we had to do a reset. Somehow this wonderful ministry was turning into a business type operation where everything was based on calculation, what you earned, how much you made and what you were entitled to in comparison to everyone else. The opportunity to serve, the dedication, the gift and the gratitude of being able to be part of such a wonderful ministry... it was being lost.

And so, we got rid of the hourly arrangements and made the positions salaried, with the understanding that work was to be completed however long it took. They would have to work together to complete everything. Amazingly, we found the relationships among staff and the whole spirit and atmosphere of the camp changed. Campers would tell their parents how much this camp was by far their favourite camp from all the day camps they went to over the summer because they experienced so much love, care and fun there. Somehow, the shift from being a job where the rewards are primarily financial to a vocation of service where the work was a gift for which everyone was grateful... this was felt by everyone. It was also great learning for our young staff as it would shape the spirit and ethic of their work into the future.

But these illustrations raise some important questions for all of us. How much in our lives is about calculation in terms of what we earn, what we deserve and what we are entitled to in terms of rights? And how much in our lives do we experience as gifts for which the fitting

response is gratitude? And how much does the experience of gift and the expression of gratitude shape what we do for others and how we live in the world? Do we serve, give and work at something or for someone because we get paid for it in some way in terms of money, praise or recognition? Or, do we serve, give and work out of heart-felt gratitude because we experience it as a gift?

Such questions are exactly what our scripture reading this morning is all about. Jesus tells a story. The genre of this story is called: parable. Jesus' parables are everyday stories with a moral twist. If you're not uncomfortable after you listen to or read a parable, it means you haven't understood it. Jesus' parables are also about what he calls: the kingdom of God or heaven – same thing. Most Jews believed the kingdom of God was about land, territory and race. Isn't that what all wars are fought over: land, territory and race? But Jesus is pointing to what is much more important than land, territory and race.

The kingdom of heaven is not about land, territory or race. No. It's a spiritual society, a space, a communion, a network of relationships based on love. To belong to the kingdom of God, you must be driven by love in the way you relate, your priorities and how you love. It's about experiencing the gift in people and in life, expressing gratitude and giving back out of love.

OK. Preacher, so how does this parable Jesus tells reveal something of the kingdom and how it works in our world? OK, there's a landowner, we're told, a farmer. He grows grapes, olives and other good things. He needs workers. Are they migrant workers or locals without land of their own? We don't know. But the market place is where they hang out waiting to be hired. The farmer in our story goes to the market early morning and hires a bunch of workers for the day. Great. But by 9am, he realizes he'll need more workers to get the day's work completed. So he hires another bunch. Again, he offers them the going rate for a day's work. Once again, though, at noon, realizing he needs more workers if the job is to be completed, he hires another bunch who still haven't been hired by anyone else. There are always workers looking for work at any time of the day. But then, he does the same at 3pm and then at 5pm. Ok, so far, so good. Clearly he's not great at calculating from the start how many workers he needs in total to complete the job. No worries. Everyone gets paid for the day no matter when they're hired. He's also thinking about providing extra help to the workers who have been hired early in the day who must be getting tired.

Finally, it's after 6pm and the work is finally completed. Everyone lines up to get paid. And here's where things get sticky. Even though workers haven't worked the same number of hours, everyone is getting paid the same amount – a day's work. But, those who started

work early are the most upset. Why? Because even though they agreed to get paid a day's work, those who worked fewer hours are also receiving the same pay for a day's work. Shouldn't they receive less, or even better, shouldn't those who started early now get more? It makes perfect sense no? It does. But here's where we have to stretch our thinking and feeling to understand more deeply.

Let's step back from our feeling of unfairness for a moment and consider the bigger picture: who has work and who does not? What are their circumstances? Who has experienced good fortune and who has suffered misfortune. Is life all about who deserves what and how much? Or is there so much we can't control for good or ill? Should we not be more generous, compassionate and understanding rather than judgemental because others seem to catch a break? Clearly, those hired at the end of the day getting full day's pay are experiencing what they're receiving as a gift, and most likely, they will be grateful for it. They'll take whatever they can get. But what if those who started early shared in that generous attitude knowing that they were fortunate to be chosen for work early in the day, and having more people given opportunity to work and get a decent wage is a good thing. Why begrudge it?

The biblical word for such generosity is: Grace. If we think of the farmer as God and if we think of ourselves as workers and if we think about what we are doing in terms of work as sowing love in the world, and if we think of God's payment to us in terms of love that we experience early in the day, can we not also see ourselves as invited to be co-workers with God, creating space around us for others to be included even after they've lived so much neglect and misfortune outside the kingdom of God for so long?

Others have done so much worse in life and maybe deserve to earn less. Others have made mistakes, failed and spurned opportunities given to them. But focussing on others in terms of how undeserving they are of anything but judgement and condemnation reveals the emptiness in our own hearts – an emptiness of love. If we're not full to overflowing we'll have little of value to share with the world and we are not living within the kingdom of heaven. When we pray in the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we're praying out of a vision for change in our world so that compassionate grace and generous love overwhelm the hard competitiveness, entitlement and calculation of who earns and deserves what and how much. Rather than just see the negative in others, why not also see the wounds, losses and the missed opportunities that have passed them by. It's all about perspective and it's all about transformation in our hearts. It's all about Grace – from God to us and then through us into the world around

us. We are called to be the hands, feet, mind and heart of Christ in the world. Christ has no body on earth but us now if he takes over our hearts.

So how does all this relate to us in this time of pandemic, protest and climate change, this time where work is changing with some super-stressed and others having lost work? We need to be less judgemental and more gracious. We need to be given eyes to see through grace the gifts that are ours and a heart full of gratitude. Let us shine this light to those around us and let us make space for others to come within the bubble of our love, for they need it more than ever.

Let us pray: Come to us, creative ground of the universe, work in us, work through us, fill the world around us with your love as a gift given and shared with hearts full of gratitude; Amen.