

***“The Generosity of Others  
Sometimes Can Be Confusing”***

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

For Sunday, September 24, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

**Scripture Readings:** Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

*(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)*

There seems to be some basic understandings of the parables, aphorisms, and sayings of Jesus that are essential to understand where he is coming from in his teachings. It hit me this week – one needs to know immense joy and a desire for generosity, or one needs to know immense grief and sadness and a desire for healing and wholeness, in order to understand the sense that is inherent in what Jesus has to say.

The best stories have both.

That is why the prodigal son is so powerful. The father has had immense grief – he had a son who has disowned him and walked off on him, taking his inheritance as a final “good riddance.” The father loses touch with the son – as far as he is concerned he is dead to him. The father has not declared the son dead, or disowned him – he simply has no way to be in touch with the younger son. That is not a source of comfort, but of immense loss and pain. Then the son magically reappears, and the joy is so immense he holds a big party. Sadness and joy, intermingled, together.

And when we hear that story, and feel the pain and sadness of the older brother who worked away and did not get the same recognition, we fail to hear the immense pain of the father and the incredible joy at the return of his son – we need not dismiss the father’s love and joy in the older son because that is a given. The story focuses on pain and joy of a different order, related to a son who was once dead and is found again.

In order to understand today’s gospel lesson, I had to come to the realization that it also is about joy and sadness, hope and uncertainty.

People are hired to go out and do a job. The local crew is waiting for work, and a person hires the people he needs. But later he hired more. Why? Does he feel sorry for those who need work? Is the task at hand greater than he at first thought? Is there a need to get everything done by sundown and more hands are wanted for the task? We do not know the full story. We just know the employer hires more people and even though they do not work a full day (some only an hour or two) they all get paid a full day’s wages.

Our sense of modern labour laws and equal pay for work of equal value kick in and we find a problem with that. But in doing so we fail to hear what might really be at work. People need a basic wage to live – is that what the employer recognized? The job must be done now, and he was willing to pay what he had to get the job done – is that what the story is about?

Anyone who has been in a situation where you would pay almost anything to get a job done understands what the employer was going through.

Last summer I was having trouble with a tire on my car. It needed inflating almost every day – certainly by every gas fill up. I was about to drive to Toronto and take a plane to a course in Chicago, and the last thing I wanted was to do was be stranded on Highway 400 – miss the course and be in a compromising situation with traffic.

I dropped by the local garage at Hilton Beach on St. Joseph' Island, told my plight, and then used the magic of the soft touch: "Whenever I came here I have received excellent service. Mind you, I have had no reason to come here in the last 25 years, since you have taken over the garage, but I wondered if you could see my car sometime tomorrow – I will bring it in whatever time works."

He seemed relieved I gave an option. I did not ask, "Please stop everything you are doing now and look at my car." And so he suggested first thing in the morning was appropriate. That meant 9:00 a.m. So I arrived early to find him hard at work, and he said: "Go for a walk around the harbour – I will put in on the hoist and it may take me 15-20 min."

Sure enough I returned in 15 min. to see he was finalizing the patch and showed me the culprit – a nail had pierced the sidewall.

As we settled up, I asked how much I owed him. Now, as background, I had gone to the bank the day before in Bruce Mines to get out \$200. I had no expectation it would cost that, but I knew a new tire in an isolated garage could cost well over \$100 if one was needed, and cost of installation and disposing of the old tire would also add up. Wanting to make sure I had enough money, I took out ten \$20 bills.

So when I asked the cost he said: "Well it did take some time to find the leak and then fix it, so I feel I need to charge you \$10."

Imagine my glee. I was prepared to pay \$100, \$120, even \$150 if a new tire was needed, and here was a bill for \$10.

My response was immediate. "You may need to charge me \$10, but I am afraid with good conscience that I must give you \$20 (since that was all I had in my wallet were \$20 bills). Buy yourself lunch."

Now my "largesse" was proven to be appropriate this past summer as I had to have another tire patched, and without batting an eye the garage in Sudbury said: "Patching a tire costs \$45 – do you want it done?" I, of course, said yes.

If you have ever been in a situation where you need desperately something, you are prepared to pay almost anything to get it in a timely manner. And if you have ever faced hardship and despair, you appreciate the kindness of others and do not see the over-arching goodwill as anything but welcomed generosity – maybe even welcomed Christian generosity.

Do we question the generosity? Do we fight against it, or rail against the morality of the person who helps us? Most of us smile, say "thank you," and move on.

We do not know why this employer hired so many people for so many different rates of pay. All we know is he was generous. He had his reasons for being generous.

The stories today are about “What happens when things go well.” Jonah and the people experience the forgiveness of God when there was fear of reprisals (and Jonah is angry because God did not do as threatened, but forgave the people). Jesus speaks of a landowner who is generous with his payment to workers.

So I looked for other examples of “What to do when things go well.” And I could not find any. It seems our lives are built around another principle: “What to do when things go wrong” or “What to do when things go badly.” There are thousands of examples of that.

Celestine Chua is among those who have written on “what to do when things do not go your way.” She offers thirteen helping points, and I share with you the good news that I am skipping over the first 12. Yet her thirteenth seems appropriate here: “Pick out the learning points from the encounter.”

So what are the learning points (or even point) of this story? Very simply, we should do as we usually do when others are generous with us: Smile and say “thank you!” Generosity is not something to judge or dismiss – it should be celebrated.

And then, as Jesus often says at the end of his stories, we should hear the implication of that celebration of generosity: “Go and do likewise.”