

**Be The Church – Share Abundance  
Sacrifice Fly  
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Matthew 20: 1-16**

So – I looked at the lectionary passages for these weeks. The Lectionary – a three year cycle of scripture used by MANY churches, has us in the Gospel of Matthew from June through November – Pentecost up to Advent. But – as I was reading the verses that follow what Jon preached from Matthew on forgiveness last Sunday, I realized the lectionary passed right over the story of the rich young man.

In short, a rich young man comes to Jesus, and asks what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus tells him, “keep the commandments.” The young man says “I have kept them all.” So Jesus says “Go and sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor and come and follow me.” And the young man went away sad, because he had many possessions.

OK. So – we’re in the midst of our annual giving campaign. My theme from our nine-week series is “Share Abundance.” Two weeks from today we will dedicate our pledges to the 2018 budget. I serve a congregation flourishing in the county with the highest median income in the State of Pennsylvania and the 25<sup>th</sup> highest median income out of 3,003 counties in the nation.

How dare the lectionary committee people who choose the texts, choose to skip the rich, young ruler in stewardship season. Talk about low-hanging fruit from scripture! Relative to most of the rest of the world’s population, you and I are well-off. Like the Rich Young Man in this story, most of us probably mirror the cryptic description for which he is remembered – he had many possessions. For the preacher getting up to bat in stewardship season, it’s like a modest fast ball right down the middle. You know where the preacher is going to hit that ball even before the bat starts to move. It is going to go all the way to share your abundance, turn in your pledge, and be generous NOW!

But that very classic and typical interpretation of this story misses one small, but rather significant mark. The call to sacrifice.

That story isn’t about rich people taking a little off the top of overflowing coffers and sprinkling it around. The young man is called to let it all go – probably because Jesus knows he belongs – body and soul – to his possessions, and nothing short of real sacrifice will turn his heart and his mind around. Nothing short of sacrifice.

So now maybe you can see why I decided NOT to use that text – and stayed with the one the lectionary selectors chose for today about the landowner and the workers. It makes a whole lot more sense, a little less confrontational – that is, until I dug into it this week and picked up a little nuance in the text!

Here at the end of the day, the landowner pays everyone the same wage. And actually, the last hired get paid first – which probably means the first hired are watching, and may assume they're going to get something more. And when they don't, they grumble. That's a whole sermon in itself – grumbling about latecomers getting goodies; more than they earned.

But if the parable is a kingdom parable, it is a reminder God gives to everyone what they need. Everyone gets to work in the vineyard. God wants everyone to have what is necessary for the day. The story shows the extravagant generosity of God. A harvest of grace. GENEROUS.

But the nuance I never noticed? This extravagance COST the landowner.

Every sophomore in Econ 101 knows this is no way to make a buck. This is bad-business, fuzzy math, along with being unfair. We all know that time plus effort equals production, and production equals pay. Those who are in the most demand, the hardest workers with the highest skills, deserve the first and greatest reward. Not to mention the way he is doing business pays no attention to profit and loss columns.

The landowner didn't get a day's worth of grapes picked by the folks hired at 5:00pm. Who knows what a day's worth of grapes is – 8 or 10 or 12 hours of grapes to be picked and pressed and turned into good wine which could then be sold in the marketplace for a profit?? Who knows what that might be worth? But no. He got one hour of grapes. Maybe even less, if these were the less able-bodied, less mobile, less vigorous workers who had been left in the marketplace by other employers; the employees nobody wanted.

Fewer grapes and a full wage means the landowner's margin is narrowed; he's giving out more than he's taking in. It COST the landowner something to do this. But he does it. Generous. And costly.

If there's an allegorical representation of God here – it reminds me of two profound truths: God's generosity is unmitigated; all-inclusive; and extravagant. AND – it costs God, as God expends God's own self for the sake of the world. The cost? A self-emptying incarnation. The cost? It's the cost of a cross. Willing "sacrifice" – letting go of standing; power; station – for the sake of the workers in the vineyard.

A colleague of mine tells this story. He writes: "Sometimes I daydream about winning the lottery. My fantasy is highly crafted, thoroughly planned. After winning, I arrive unexpectedly at my sibling's workplaces, freshly paid mortgages in hand, college funds for every kid in the extended family. Next I pay off the debt in the congregation I serve. Then I get in touch with my inner philanthropist. I hire a financial planner – Presbyterian of course.

She is so moved upon hearing my selfless and humanitarian motives that she donates her services. With the \$450 million remaining (HEY – it's MY daydream), our newly incorporated family foundation finances inner city scholarships and cancer research, twenty new church developments and countless water systems in Africa. The list goes on, but you get the idea."

Why is it so much fun to imagine being spectacularly suddenly wealthy, and giving it away? I think it has to do with the completely libertine joy of sharing money I do not earn or deserve,

money that falls from the sky, money I do not expect and upon which I do not depend. It is the ultimate fantasy: giving which costs me nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

Somehow, we’ve lost the concept of sacrifice. The depression generation knew sacrifice. From the dust bowl to war rations, feeding hobos at the back door. You know at the depth of the great depression, Presbyterians gave a higher percentage of their incomes to the church than we do today – at the depth of the depression. Sacrifice was a good word; sacrifice was a motivating word – not a bad word.

A friend of mine said his stewardship committee removed the word sacrifice he had written in his stewardship letter to the congregation. Too negative.

Sacrifice spoke to the Depression generation about trusting God amidst deprivation. That’s not our situation today but maybe sacrifice today could be God’s holy antidote to self-indulgence amidst plenty.

I was blessed as a young man. I grew up with models of sacrifice. My father drove a basic, stripped down Plymouth you could get – 6-cylinder with a 3 speed on the column; barely had an AM radio. We never had the biggest TV; and weren’t the first to get color. We didn’t go out to eat weekly; we camped on vacations instead of staying in fancy hotels. There were other things that came first. The church pledge. 10% from the first check every month. From the beginning. Saving for college funds for the kids so they wouldn’t be saddled with debt.

Sacrifices – yes. That is, if you buy into the consumer model – the “he who has the most toys; the newest toys; the best toys wins” mindset. That is, if you think getting, having, acquiring is going to do anything more than find you and me surrounded by abundance, and still anxious there won’t be enough. Some people considered those sacrifices – but my parents didn’t. They saw it as participating in God’s economy, the sharing of abundance.

Jesus – for the joy that was set before him – endured the cross. The joy of bringing God’s extravagant grace to the world – made sacrifice worth it. The landowner – who knows there will be joy in the homes of those who never got hired for a full days’ work, but who went home with a full days wage – knows generosity can be contagious; generosity can change lives.

You know, I NEVER talk to folks who tithe, who talk about sacrifice. Most of them say it started out that way – trying to get to giving 10% of their income to kingdom work – whether through this church or some other organization doing kingdom work. It was often a tough start – swimming against the tide of accumulation, and bigger and better. But not once they got there. What others see as sacrifice – like forgoing that new car; or waiting on the granite in the kitchen – what others see as sacrifice, the tither sees as the privilege of participating in the bigger things God is doing in the world.

It’s a spiritual thing. Being formed in the way of Christ. And finding out that sacrifice for the sake of others – while on the world’s terms may be costly – in God’s terms, becomes the experience of bounty. The bounty of joy at seeing lives changed, the bounty of generosity’s contagion being spread, the bounty of proclaiming in word and deed that the self-emptying path of Jesus is actually the path to being made full – body, mind and soul.

Like when I see someone give a week's vacation to go on a mission trip to Mexico – or install a water filtration system in Honduras. I know – some of their friends and neighbors may say, "What a sacrifice." And they will say, "NO – not at all. I received far more blessing than anything I gave up."

Too often we think, like my friend with the lottery winnings, that giving that costs nothing will be satisfying. Giving from the cream off the top – contributing from whatever is leftover – doesn't participate in God's economy nearly so much as that which costs something. And the miracle is, when you give that way – God's way – you find you gain something far better.

Second sentence on your bulletin cover: 2 Corinthians 9 - This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals, is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.

That you and I might be formed in the way of Christ. Let us be generous, even costly for God's reward is indeed beyond imagining.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Karl Travis, Stewardship for Congregational Leaders, 2006.