

**Generosity that defies logic**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 24, 2017

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? Matthew 20:15-16

There is something primal in our inner child that thinks life is supposed to be fair. Unfortunately, it isn't and never was. Those who have been raised with entitlement and privilege expect things to operate according to the rules. It just isn't that simple.

Jesus illustrates this expectation in his parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The same wages are paid to those who work for only one hour as those who put in a full day's work. The owner of the vineyard goes out several times during the day to hire additional workers; first at nine in the morning, then again at noon, and finally at three o'clock in the afternoon. On this particular day, the owner goes out once more to hire workers at five o'clock who only work for the last hour. At the end of the day, all receive the same full day's pay. There is no distinction between those who work all day and those who only work for the last hour. When those who put in a full day's work complain that it is not fair for the other laborers to be paid the same amount, the landowner reminds them that they are paid for what they agreed to. They should not begrudge his generosity that he pays the others.

Our innate sense of justice is on the side of those who demand fair wages and equal pay for equal work. Imagine this parable in a present day setting in California's Napa Valley wine country. The vineyard owner is up early to hire unemployed workers in his vineyard. In spite of the fact that he hires them in staggered hours, he pays all of them for a full day's work. As a result, the grape picker's local union files a class action suit on behalf of those who were hired earlier in the day on the premise that they deserve more than those who were hired at the end of the day.

This story is not a lesson in labor relations. Rather, it is an illustration of God's generous and compassionate love that is neither earned nor deserved. It tells us that we should not begrudge God's generosity for those we whom think don't deserve it. The human principles of fairness and equity don't apply. It is God's incomprehensible, mysterious and unconditional love that welcomes and redeems the worst sinner who repents. The nature of God's grace defies all human logic because redemptive love erases all accounts of our sins and offenses.

It isn't that God is not concerned about fairness and justice, it's that our standard of fairness doesn't compare to God's standard. Jesus gave tax collectors and prostitutes equal share in the hope and possibility of redemption. Were it not for the generosity of God's grace our own sins and offenses would not be forgiven.

Think of when you received undeserved grace. I once was driving along behind a car that was moving at the same speed when a policeman on the side of the road pulled him over and let me pass on by. I felt both fortunate and guilty. Being spared from getting a ticket was something I didn't deserve. Grace is something we receive even if we don't deserve it.

We are bewildered why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. We agonize over the loss of one who gave so much and had so much more to give. In despair, we think we have a case against God in questioning why innocent people suffer. We have to resist easy answers because human logic doesn't apply to what we can't comprehend. Our system of logic doesn't compare to the transcendent power of God's love for us. We cannot expect to live by the simplistic reasoning that good people are rewarded and bad people are punished. It all comes down to the plain and simple truth that we are all eligible for redemption not for anything we earn or deserve, but by God's unconditional love give freely to us. Just as we cannot expect to know God on the testimony of others, we are not entitled because of family connections with the church. God does not operate on the seniority system or on family legacy.

Jesus tells us that those who are last come first and those who are first go to the end of the line. (Matthew 20:16) Grace is given freely without regard to merit because God does not use a timekeeper's clock or an accounting ledger. Those who are first in our logic are last and those who are last go first. All are in need of redemption and all are eligible for God's saving grace.

Stephen Carter, a leading scholar on constitutional law at Yale, made the point in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief* that American law and politics trivialize religious devotion. Secular minds attach God's name to what they expect instead of what God wants. This is why God comforts the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable.

The paradox of living the Christian life is that being part of the church's mission to serve the poor and marginalized people is its own reward. Resist the notion that we have to take care of our own first. We take care of all in need because we all belong to the same human family. It doesn't matter if they look different. It doesn't matter if they have different beliefs. It doesn't matter if they are from different origins. Charity may begin at home but it does not end there.

In the realm of God, everything is turned around. If we think that we should be given priority we will find ourselves wait-listed. If we have no illusions we will not be disillusioned. God loves each and every one of us as if there were only one of us. That is all we need to know.