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The Power of Generosity

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Author and illustrator Warren Hanson tells a powerful story about a man whose business travels took him into a real small town called Hendricks in Minnesota. He arrived in Hendricks around lunch time, and after making the observation that the continental breakfast included with his stay at a hotel the night before hadn't amounted to much, he decided he'd stop for a bite eat. When he realized Hendricks did not have the usual fast food restaurants, he noticed several trucks and cars parked in front of a little place called "Irene's Café" and decided this was the best option. Upon entering the small diner, he saw walls full of small town memorabilia, various customers at tables, booths and a lunch counter, and a big revolving glass pie display, he noticed the smell of comfort foods like gravy and grease, and then his eyes lit on a chalkboard on the wall displaying the words written in chalk: *Today's Special*. In the space below where we would expect an entree or two to be listed, someone had written the words: *Yes it is!*

The businessman was not impressed but took a seat anyway, and was instantly met by a waitress wearing a plastic name tag that said: Irene. She was friendly, asked if he wanted coffee, took his order, and he noticed how she was able to make him feel cared for as she kept a careful eye on the rest of her customers too. During his meal, which was served and eaten at a pace much slower than a fast food restaurant, the businessman couldn't help but notice a variety of people of many ages and backgrounds eating alone or with a group or one other person.

After he finished his leisurely lunch, which included a big slice of homemade pie, the businessman asked for his bill, only to be told by Irene that there was no charge. When he looked at her incredulously, she directed his attention to the chalkboard sign he had seen when he came into the diner, the one that said *Today's Special*. She told the businessman that day was indeed a very special day for her because earlier that morning she had been to the doctor who spoke the words she thought she might never hear: she was cancer free. Irene went on to tell her story: how she had been diagnosed with breast cancer

and had gone through a long treatment process where she felt pretty miserable most of the time. So miserable she was afraid she'd have to shut down her diner while she underwent the treatment. But the people of Hendricks wouldn't hear of it. Many of the people who lived in town volunteered to do what they could: whether it was waiting tables, helping cook, washing dishes, ordering food and supplies, whatever it took to keep the doors open so Irene could still have an income, not worry about her diner, and focus on getting well. She was so grateful to all the people who had so generously helped her, she vowed if she ever heard the words "cancer free", she'd pay them all back. And the day the businessman came in to her diner was *the* day. That meant, she said, that every meal was on the house, even the meal of a stranger.

The businessman was stunned, he had never had such an experience before. As he left, he tried to leave a tip, a generous one, but was told there was no need for that either. He walked out the door of Irene's Café realizing that day had been special to him because it was the first time he'd encountered generosity and it changed him. It made him think differently about the fight he'd had with his spouse before he left on this trip and how he needed to listen and repent, it made him reconsider how he'd treated the people he did business with, and most of all, it made him realize generosity isn't only about giving, it is just as much about receiving. And receiving Irene's generosity made him more aware of the ways he could give.

I can't help but love that story, although it might be easy to think it is just a sentimental story made up by a writer who just wanted to tug at our heartstrings. In real life, we could argue, things like don't happen, even though there really is an Irene's Café in the town of Hendricks, Minnesota. But generosity like this does exist in the real world. In two locations in New Jersey there is what is called a Community Restaurant run by the Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation (yes, the lead singer of the Rock Band Bon Jovi), called the Soul Kitchen. At this Community Restaurant you can order gourmet, organic meals, made with locally sourced ingredients, like Asian Bok Choy Salad, Spring Asparagus Bisque, Grilled Chicken, Atlantic Flounder, Tuscan Pork Loin and have a homemade brownie with peanut butter banana cream all prepared by professional chefs served in a clean, lovely environment. This is a community restaurant, which means that its primary purpose is to serve healthy meals to anyone and everyone, families and individuals, who want a meal. The catch is this: there are no prices on the menu. All meals are paid for either with donations of money or volunteering to work in

the restaurant in any capacity a person is able. Jon Bon Jovi's vision is that people can come to his restaurant and receive a meal and an empowering experience of contributing positively to the life of others. Soul Kitchen serves as another example of generosity that begins with giving freely as a way to empower generosity to those willing to receive it.

I see such extravagant generosity at the heart of our Gospel lesson today. We can miss that part if we skip to the bit about being ready, where it is easy to worry about how to live into what sounds like an impossible ideal of being continually vigilant. That is why we need to remember the first part of our Gospel where Jesus tells his listeners, and us two important things about God and us.

The first is Jesus told his listeners is to not be afraid. That message is a strongly consistent message in both the Old and New Testaments. I'm sure I've mentioned before that individuals have taken it upon themselves to count the number of times the Bible tells us about God or a messenger of God's telling someone or a group to not be afraid; and the number they came up with is 366. I'm sure it is no coincidence there are as many reminders by God to not be afraid as there are days in the year plus one more. It seems God doesn't want us to be afraid, even in the midst of change or uncertainty. Which means we need to be careful whenever we hear someone telling us about the need to be afraid, especially if they want to tie that message to God. Because a message of fear is inconsistent with God's message of *do not be afraid*. Perhaps God doesn't want us to be afraid because fear can cause so much damage, fear can lead to distrust, or jealousy, or greed, or anger and even hate. Most often actions of tragic violence take place because of anger or fear. When we are afraid it makes it very hard to be generous, it makes it very hard to learn about and understand, or love our neighbor. Which may be why today's Gospel has Jesus reminding his flock and us one more time that God does not want us to be afraid.

The second thing Jesus said about God and us is what God *does* want. According to our Gospel today what God does want is to give us something. God doesn't want to give us more rules to follow. God doesn't want to give us pain. God doesn't want to give us suffering. According to Jesus, it is God's delight, God's good pleasure, to give us God's Kingdom. This doesn't just mean to welcome us into heaven when we die, but to give us heaven here on earth, right now. This tells us something about God I think we often forget: that God is generous, even unusually generous.

That is perhaps what Jesus was saying in his parable about the slaves who stayed up and waited for their master to return home. I think it is fair to say that parables about slaves and masters can be challenging for us to hear today because words like slave and master conjure for us issues of injustice, and inequality. But let's take a look at what really happened to those slaves in this parable: when the master returned he didn't set them to work. It was the master who put on work clothes and served his slaves. That would have been unheard of in Jesus' day; a master serving his slaves or servants would not have happened. But it did in Jesus' parable, where Jesus used the image of a master transcending his station in order to serve his slaves to show us an act of generosity can also be a way of making everyone equal.

A similar thing happens in Jon Bon Jovi's Community Restaurant the Soul Kitchen, where on any given night, you can find the rocker washing dishes. He washes the dishes he says in interviews, because he "can't cook a lick", and so dish washing is what he can physically do to participate in the Community Restaurant. At the Soul Kitchen, everyone experiences the generosity of dignity not just by enjoying and preparing delicious food, but by contributing to an environment where everyone no matter their station in life, even the homeless, are welcome. And those who have dined at and volunteered at the Soul Kitchen all say they have experienced a little bit of heaven here on earth.

Maybe that is where the being ready in our Gospel comes in. God's Kingdom, where there is a place for everyone at the table, happens when we first clear out the fear and worry from our hearts and minds and souls so that we can make room in ourselves to receive God's loving kingdom. Receiving God's kingdom is an act of humility: as the businessman who ate lunch at Irene's Café in Hendricks Minnesota discovered. It means setting aside all our pride of being self-sufficient and certain in order to simply receive what God has to give. So that when we give, we are simply sharing God's kingdom. We do not create God's kingdom, God does that, we simply receive it and share it. That is the work of being ready: living as best we can the values of God's kingdom by respecting the dignity of every human being, forgiving those who hurt us, praying for our enemies, finding ways to get along with those we disagree with even when our work places or schools or culture don't always share those values.

As we get ever closer to the beginning of a new school year and will be welcoming both new and returning members of OU's campus community, perhaps we can prepare ourselves for ways we can welcome them not just to our parish, worship and programs, but to God's Kingdom by opening our hearts to simply receive what God has to give us. Perhaps that means chasing some fear out of our hearts and minds and souls so that we can approach any challenges and new opportunities with thoughtfulness and hope. So that we can continue our kingdom work through our ministry of the generosity of presence and be ready to engage the people who will come through our doors hungry for God's Kingdom and who we will leave our doors to meet.