

Proper 28 A November 15, 2020
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Economy of Generosity
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

It was one of those days. I had a lot going on that day, eleven years ago. The day included not one but two root canals for me, after which I drove home in a Wisconsin blizzard, stopped off at the store to pick up soft foods to eat, called the person in charge of snow removal at my parish, - this was my first parish in Sussex, Wisconsin- all before the effects of the Novocain wore off. At the time, I lived in an apartment complex not far from the church. The building I lived in had a common hallway, and I had to walk through the underground parking lot, up several stairs, through three fire doors, down the common hallway, before I got to the door to my apartment; all the while carrying full shopping bags and talking on my cell phone. After I got into my apartment, put down the bags and ended the call, I noticed something was wrong. One of my cats was not in the apartment.

Just as I was getting that tight feeling in my stomach because of the realization I was going to have to go out and look for my cat, there was a knock at my door. I opened it to find two of my new neighbors from across the hall, a man and his daughter standing there holding my runaway cat. I was so very grateful and said as much, but after they left, I felt like I wanted to do something to express my gratitude. Past experience told me I only had about thirty minutes left before the Novocain wore off and I'd be feeling pretty uncomfortable, so whatever I was going to do, it had to be pretty quick. I looked around my kitchen and found a container of Pillsbury cinnamon rolls in my refrigerator. The directions told me they took about twenty minutes to bake. So, I baked the cinnamon rolls, put them on a pretty blue plate, put icing on them, and went and knocked on my neighbor's door. When he opened the door and I offered the cinnamon rolls as an expression of my thanks for returning my cat, my neighbor looked at my gift as if he wasn't so sure about it, like there was something wrong. Reluctantly he took the cinnamon rolls but didn't seem sure what to do with them.

For those of you who have heard this story before, you know this was the beginning of a relationship with my neighbor that turned into a friendship and later blossomed into marriage. And as anyone who knows my husband now could attest, Michael's usual reaction to a gift of food is enthusiastic gratitude. But at the time, he and his daughter were not so sure how to respond to an expression of generosity.

In our coffee shop ministry I sometimes witness a similar reluctance to receive generosity when someone without cash is told they can still get a cup of coffee or tea or hot cocoa because it has already been purchased through our pay it forward

program. The response I often observe is suspicion; it seems to be difficult to not only believe but to trust that someone actually has paid ahead for a beverage so someone else can enjoy it. There have been a few folks who will take their coffee but offer to leave contact information and our CrossRoads Café staff assures them that is not necessary – the coffee or tea or hot chocolate is theirs to enjoy because our coffee shop operates not on a debt model but on a model of Christ-like generosity. No one pays us back, but anyone can pay for what they order and/or pay it forward for someone else to receive and participate in the gift of love called generosity.

How we respond to generosity is one of the dynamics in play in the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel reading from Matthew about a man who gives very generous gifts to his servants before leaving on a journey. Although the language in the parable might make that difficult to see at first, especially because the language of slavery appears in this parable. Slavery of any kind is wrong, whether it is chattel slavery that was unjustly practiced for hundreds of years in our country and unfortunately still exists in some places in the world, or other means of keeping a person trapped in service because of debt. Awareness of this injustice can't be underscored enough. However, this parable is not about slavery, and that it uses that language is unfortunate because it can distract us from important dynamics at play.

We also need to remember today's reading about a man who gave extravagant gifts of money is not a historical event that actually took place. It is a parable; an exaggerated fiction Jesus told to invite us into reflection about life and life in relationship with God. One of the invitations of this parable is to consider how we respond to generosity.

Most people I know don't have any trouble with generosity as long as they are perceived as the generous giver, but this story begins with how three people responded to being the recipients - not givers - of an extraordinarily exaggerated act of generosity. There has been some disagreement with scholars and commentators about the amount of money a talent from today's parable represents. One commentator wrote one talent is the equivalent of thirty pounds of gold. Another said one talent equals fifteen years' worth of wages, and another insists one talent is actually twenty years of wages. Whoever has it right, we get the idea: whether the person received five, two, or one talent, they were all given a tremendously ridiculous amount of money. Notice the extravagant gift was given without expectation or directions about what they were supposed to do with the gift. Just that the man who gave the talents entrusted them to the care of the three servants.

Entrusting something so valuable and precious reminds me of the creation story when God made the world and everything in it and then entrusted the world and everything in it to the care of humans. To this day we still wonder if that means we have God's permission to do whatever we want with the world and its resources or if we are to recognize this caregiver role as a responsibility to learn about the world, its systems and recognize how our actions can hurt or help the very planet we live on and depend on for our survival. Two characters in the parable seemed to explore this question by using the talents they were given. We aren't told details or what business models they followed, only that two of the three characters seemed to have received the gifts with a gratitude that manifested in creativity. Two characters found a way to participate in the generosity they were shown by being generous themselves and creating something new so that they could make what they were given better.

We have to be careful here not to assume a 21st century acceptance of greed in interpreting this parable. Parables aren't always neat little allegories with one thing in a parable clearly representing something in real life. Jesus was not using this parable as a motivational speech to inspire up and coming business entrepreneurs. At the same time, entrepreneurial thinking doesn't have to be only about how to turn a pile of money into a larger pile of money, which is how we unfortunately think of the term. Instead, entrepreneurship can be another form of creativity; of seeing needs and addressing them or recognizing changes that need to happen in order to live into opportunities in ways that improves life for others. At any rate, while the generous giver seemed delighted with the two characters who reflected his generosity, and were not afraid of the responsibility that went with what they were given, one character had a totally different response.

The third character did not receive the generous gift because he refused to participate. To this third character, the extraordinary generosity appeared to be a heavy burden he couldn't bear. To make matters worse, when he gave back exactly what he had been given, the third character gave an excuse why he didn't even try to use his talent. That excuse was fear and suspicion of the person who gave him so much. To me, it seemed like the third character blamed the giver for his inability to delight in the generosity he had been given, which was also his justification to not participate.

This also reminds me of the beginning of creation when the first man blamed God for giving him Eve after they were busted for eating from the forbidden tree. Instead of being open, accountable, and vulnerable, it seemed easier to blame the giver for the gift. One of the problems with us attitude, as the first man and woman learned too, is that it creates a rift in relationships, and contributes to divisions in

families and communities and even in our relationship with God and somehow makes life less holy or good than it could be.

Which may be why this parable ends with the servant who blamed the giver being cast out, not because he was disobedient or a bad servant, but because in a way, that is where he chose to be by choosing fear and blame over participating in the generosity in he had been given. Maybe this whole parable isn't about making money, or giving what money you can to trustworthy organizations that will use your money for good – although that is certainly a good thing to, it just isn't what this parable is about. Perhaps this parable is about how we have been given the tremendous extraordinarily amazing gift of life and it is up to us how we will live it. This isn't about having children or making millions of dollars – the multiplication here isn't literal. It is about how we use what we have to make the world better than we found it, to participate in life in ways that furthers God's kingdom, God's dream for us and all the world. It's examining our resources and thinking about how we can use what we have to help bridge those gaps in relationships or misunderstandings, its about learning to use what we have to show respect for every human being, even those who are different, it's about choosing to trust the generosity of God over the debt system we are too quick to accept without question.

That is what my husband learned. At the time he wasn't able to imagine - and neither was I -what receiving a pretty little blue plate with warm cinnamon rolls on it would lead to: exchanging plates and cookies and sharing dinners and walks and movies and laughter and growing so close together so that those cinnamon rolls have increased into so much more. Opening the door to those cinnamon rolls was opening his heart and mind to a different way of living, one that was not about debt, or paying people back, but living deeper into God's love every day, and growing into the amazing person God dreams he can be. I hope our pay-it-forward model at our coffee shop ministry introduces people to the same possibility. It doesn't have to be millions of dollars that makes a difference. Just receiving the ridiculously generous love of God and participating in that love by turning what we have into the start of the kingdom of heaven growing vigorously in our midst.