

Last week we learned that it is as blessed to receive forgiveness as it is to give it. Adopting the ways of the Kingdom of God means admitting that we need forgiveness, and then graciously accepting forgiveness when it is offered. In so doing, we will learn why it is important to offer forgiveness in turn. Today we learn that another blessing to receive is providence – in the scriptural sense of God’s continuing interest in creation. God does not set the cosmos in motion and then abandon it to its own devices. Rather, God directs the created order to God’s own good ends. To graciously show providence to others – that is, to act generously – we must learn to receive God’s providence graciously. This is precisely the lesson God teaches the Hebrew people complaining of hunger. God provides food and fowl on a daily basis. A nightly quail and an omer of manna is sufficient. Be thankful, not greedy. Just so, the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to rely on God’s providence to give us our daily bread. That is, we are to count on God’s goodness to supply us with what we need. No more is necessary. To receive providence graciously is to trust that everything happens in fulfillment of God’s larger purposes, whether or not we can discern those purposes. Trusting in God’s providence is not easy. We would rather rely on our ingenuity. And our strength. And our social connections. And our information and technology – anything, really, but rely on God the unfathomable.

Coins may say, In God We Trust. But it’s not true. We place more trust even in money than in God. We might display piety – that is, a reverence toward holy things – yet still misread God’s providence and fail to show gratitude. Piety is not the same as trust in God’s providence. There’s a kind of piety that venerates what we call holy but vilifies all that is earthly and natural. Never mind that God created all that is, earthly and natural, and pronounced it good. The God of Biblical witness does not tiptoe around that which is carnal or cruel or sordid. It is a false piety that expects God to quarantine the venal and violent. There’s an opposite kind of piety that claims, “God knows why,” no matter how brutal the outcome. That’s a stained-glass piety, appealing but easily shattered when things don’t work out. It is false piety to expect everything to work out according to some inscrutable rules. Creation is ever-changing, full of variances. When things go well with the world, it’s not hard to believe that God is watching over all and benevolently providing what is needed (Isn’t it reassuring that God wants things to work the way we want them.) But when things go to hell in the world, a piety based on “God knows best” has some explaining to do. As science is discovering all the time, God engineers a lot of variance into creation. Certain phenomena happen according to probabilities. And probabilities presume a range of deviation from the norm.

God's providence is behind events that are destructive, deadly, or demoralizing. Parts of history that seem wrong from a human perspective may nevertheless further God's ends. Of the many hazards pervasive on planet Earth, hurricanes are the case du jour. Even God, I expect, winces at the coincidence of three major Atlantic hurricanes in 5 weeks. Our parable from Matthew 20 is about fairness. Yet fair-play is virtually a civil religion. One person can drink all the alcohol they want, and not become dependent; another cannot. The first-born sibling gets the harshest treatment, while the last-born gets all the breaks, they say. Remember the kid in school who aced every test without seeming to ever crack a book? Say you're stuck in checkout lane 3, waiting while someone asks for a price check, holding up the line. Just my luck, you mumble. While you're leafing through a tabloid, a light flicks on. "I can take someone at lane 5!" Who gets to the open lane? That's right – the Johnny-come-latelies at the back of the line. Give us this day our daily bread? Yeah – that's all I'm trying to buy. My daily bread. Let's stipulate that life isn't always fair. We call it luck: random odds that occasionally favor the unprepared, the undeserving, the latecomer to the game. Although perfectly within the laws of probability, extreme reward or extreme penalty disappoint our sense of fair play. I think this disappointment is a spiritual concern. So does Jesus, in the Parable of the Laborers. Imagine that you are among the first hearers of this gospel in Palestine in the year 90 A.D. Imagine the stunning impact on this audience of the parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner.

"Wait, Matthew! Read that back to me. He pays the last workers WHAT?!"
 A full-day's wage for an hour's work.
 "He pays the first workers WHAT?!"
 The same amount as the Johnny-come-latelies.
 The parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner has always been provocative because it sets up a conflict between two apparently-equal goods: generosity and justice. The inequity is on purpose, not some random event. It's the landowner's will to pay everyone the same wage. The short-timers in the parable receive a windfall. Generous, but unjust. By comparison, the full-day workers lose out. Ungenerous perhaps, but not unjust. What I learn from the parable is that receiving God's loving care should inspire us to share that love and care with others. In other words, generosity generates generosity. The parable proves this thesis in both positive and negative ways. A landowner enjoys God's good harvest. His vines produce grapes abundantly. He needs all the hands he can hire to harvest the crop, which seems to be ballooning by the hour. The owner can afford to pay generously and he resolves to do so. In the end, though, his generosity creates resentment among some of the hired laborers. Why? Because they are unwilling (perhaps unable) to accept the unfairness of the outcome. It is unfair when one-size-fits-all generosity – in this case of money, but it could also be time or attention or feelings – replaces common hiring expectations.

Common employment for a common wage during a time of labor surplus – which could have brought people closer together – winds up driving the workers apart. The same alienation can happen when a dating couple gets married. During courtship, the relationship may be sustained based on mutual favors. Each one tries to out-do their beloved in kindness. You brought me flowers, so I'm fixing your favorite dinner. Such is the currency of romantic love. Mutuality can bring the couple closer together. However, there's a risk. If one party starts to receive the kind attentions of the other as deserved, rather than offered purely out of love, the name of the game changes to Entitlement. The score in relationships where one party feels entitled to the love of the other is measured in disappointment and resentment, not unlike the worker-resentment in the parable. For marriage to last, there has to be something beyond mutual kindness. A marriage needs sufficient emotional capital to cover the normal ebbs and flows in a relationship. You might call emotional capital "commitment." The Biblical word is "covenant." A successful transition from dating to marriage depends on the couple growing beyond mutual kindness – quid pro quo – to mutual covenant, a commitment to stay in the relationship no matter what. Should one marriage partner let the other down, they have a covenant to fall back on – something more valuable than mutual self-interest. A covenant doesn't mean they can stop being nice. Unexpected – even undeserved – kindness to one another helps a lot.

Kindnesses recharge the marriage battery – kindness given, kindness received. But even without kindnesses, there is still security if the relationship is maintained in covenant. Covenant marriage can be a realization of God's providence in human scale. In covenant relationships, where there is ample capital for forgiveness, we learn to accept the love of one another gratefully, without thinking of love as an entitlement or as something we have to earn. In a covenant, generosity is received gratefully. In relationships not based on covenant, providence is seldom realized, no matter how kind the parties are to each other. Unearned generosity is not received as a gracious gift, but only what is due. I wouldn't blame the landowner in the parable for turning into the Soup Nazi. You are not grateful? No more zoup for you. You work for a denarius, you get a denarius. Be gone. But the landowner isn't resentful. That's because God is God and we are not. God remains gracious. Human generosity seldom comes without strings. The human hope in being generous is for gratitude. When generosity is received with gratitude, the recipient is free to pay it forward. As we know, "re-gifting" rarely works. Without true gratitude for what we receive, we cannot lovingly give it away. By receiving God's providence gratefully, we avoid the false spiritual paths of perfect holiness or God-knows-best. God's providence received gratefully inspires the recipient to pay it forward.

When I last preached this parable,
I cited Question 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism,
a classic teaching aid.

Q. 60 asks: “How are you righteous before God?”

The answer, in part, is:

“In spite of the fact that I have grievously sinned
against all the commandments of God,
nevertheless, God – without any merit of my own,
out of pure grace – grants me the benefits
of the perfect grace of Christ,
imputing to me his righteousness and holiness,
if only I **accept** such favor with a trusting heart.”

The Heidelberg Catechism gets our parable:

The generous master grants
the same perfect grace to every worker,
imputing to each their worth as a human being,
without regard to how much or how little
they have done.

Jesus closes the parable with a paradox
that sums up the vast difference
between God’s providence and human generosity.
“In God’s kingdom, many who are first will be last,
and the last will be first.”

The last ones in line to receive human generosity
are the first to receive God’s.

The first to receive God’s providence
are the last candidates for human generosity.

What’s the Good News in that?

Simply this: God is God, and we are not.

Human generosity has limits:

we may be generous, but only up to a point.

And we expect a thank-you in return.

Human generosity, no matter how unselfish,
comes with expectations –
ranging from simple gratitude to slavish devotion.

God’s generosity is lavish, beyond limit, extravagant.

God’s generosity is unconditional.

That’s why God is God and we are not.

CONCLUSION

Like the underpaid day-laborers,
the wandering Hebrews grumble,
never mind that God just rescued them from slavery.

Still, God responds providentially
to their grumbling and promises flesh every night
and bread every morning.

The parable reading reminds us that human wealth,
itself derived from the providence of God’s creation,
is to be used compassionately.

God is the Ultimate Provider.

It is Blessed to Receive God’s providence.

God’s grace is given, not earned.

It is Blessed to Receive God’s providence.

We are to receive it with gratitude.

In gratitude, we are called to be generous. Amen.