

Reflecting God's Generosity to Others

Isaiah 55:6-9, Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30, Matthew 20:1-16

Proper 20 A, September 21, 2014

"Thanks a lot!" are words that familiar to most of us, I am sure. Often times, we speak these words sincerely with a **genuine smile upon our faces** to someone else who has just given us a gift or shown us even some small act of kindness.

"Thanks a lot!" a woman wrote in a beautiful **"Thank You" card to the other members in her Sunday school class**, after they brought to her house a casserole, a salad and an apple pie; a complete meal to feed her and her family—on the day after returned home from the hospital. **"Thanks a lot!"** she wrote to her brothers and sisters in Christ. I imagine she was smiling as she wrote those words, though none of her fellow Sunday school class members were there to see it!

But **"Thanks a lot!"** can also be spoken by one person to another **very sarcastically** too.

Maybe you **recently caught a cold**, and you believe you know who the culprit was! It was that coworker, who came to work sick several days in a row; who was constantly blowing her nose, coughing and sneezing all around you. You go up to her and say rather sarcastically: **"Thanks a lot! I sure appreciate you giving to me your cold!"**

When you stop and think about it, **EVERY ONE OF THOSE WORKERS IN JESUS' PARABLE COULD HAVE SAID "THANKS A LOT!"** to the foreman at the end of their workday too, when they received their paychecks from him at the end of the day. I imagine that some of those workers hired later in the day could have said these words sincerely with big smiles upon their faces: "Thanks a lot!" Yet, the other laborers who worked a **9 hour or a 12 hour day may have spoken these words far more sarcastically with a very disgruntled tone**. There was no smile on their faces. When they said: **"Thanks a lot!"** what they were really thinking to themselves was: **"Thanks for nothing!"**

Today, of course, this same situation would probably result in some of those **"TICKED OFF" EMPLOYEES FILING A GRIEVANCE AGAINST THEIR BOSS**, because that which had just taken place, at least in their own minds, was outrageously unfair! Some of the people there worked only **ONE HOUR** that day, but received a full day's pay. Some worked only **3 HOURS** but received a full day's pay. Some only worked **6 HOURS** but received a full day's pay. **Some who worked 9 HOURS were given a full day's pay; and perhaps this would NOT HAVE BEEN NEARLY AS OFFENSIVE TO THOSE PEOPLE WHO WORKED 12 HOURS** for a full day's pay, with there being some margin of discrepancy in their pay scales among them, but how dare that boss! How dare that boss give the same amount of money in their paychecks to the people who worked only one hour of the day, in comparison to those who toiled from sunup to sundown for twelve, long, very hard, grueling hours of work!

But the owner of the vineyard has several valid points to make here too! He wasn't treating those who worked from 6 AM to 6 PM unfairly. For after all, they consented to work for a **DENARIUS**, the average pay scale for a common laborer in those days. We read in verse 2 of our Gospel lesson: **"After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard!"**

I CAN'T EVEN PRETEND TO KNOW WHY THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE INSTRUCTED THE FOREMAN TO GIVE TO EACH MAN A FULL DAY'S WAGE WHO WORKED THAT DAY! Maybe it's because the whole village and nation where he lived were experiencing a **GREAT ECONOMIC DEPRESSION**. He realized that work was hard to come by in those days, and yet all these **men had wives and children at home!** He didn't want those children to go to bed hungry that night, without bread upon their table. Maybe as a **REAL ENTREPRENEUR** he had other irons in the fire. This vineyard wasn't his only asset. **MAYBE HE HAD JUST RECEIVED A WINDFALL OF A PROFIT** on another business venture, and he felt he was in a position to show some **UNDESERVED KINDNESS** to those people who only worked a few hours that day!

YET, "IT JUST ISN'T FAIR!" they protested! **"IT JUST ISN'T RIGHT!"** they said rather boldly in unison to the master of the house after the foreman **HANDED THEM THEIR PAYCHECKS THAT DAY!** *"These last men hired worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!" (v. 12)*

So listen once again to what the master of the house says to them: *"Friend, I am doing you no wrong! Did you not agree to work for me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. If I choose to give this last worker as I gave to you, what is that to you? Am I not allowed to do what I choose to do with my own money? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Vv. 12-15)*

AND ISN'T THIS PRECISELY THE POINT OF JESUS' PARABLE? FINDING A WELCOME RECEPTION INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD MAY HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU IN THE VERY EARLIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE, when you were made a member of the body of Christ, as an infant, through the sacred washing of Holy Baptism. Perhaps for some of you, you didn't really **BECOME A CHRISTIAN UNTIL YOU WERE MUCH OLDER; MAYBE 9 OR 10, OR 11 YEARS OLD!** Maybe for some of you it happened when you were hopefully only in **THE MIDDLE OF THIS JOURNEY CALLED LIFE,** while for others it happened in an **ELEVENTH HOUR CONVERSION, NOT UNLIKE THE CONVERSION OF THAT ONE THIEF ON THE CROSS;** who was being crucified right next to Jesus. He is the one who **"GOT IT,"** who was able to understand who this Jesus was and why he was there on that middle cross between those two convicted thieves.

WE READ IN LUKE 23:39-43, *"One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying: 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying: 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation, and we indeed justly? For we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong!' And then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!' And Jesus said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise!'"*

It's a slightly **REVISED VERSION OF THAT OLD HYMN** which many of us love to sing entitled: **"Hark, the Voice of Jesus Crying" (LSB 826);** that we sang as the sermon hymn today; a hymn closely associated with our Gospel lesson where we sang in verse 2:

**"Some take up his task in morning, to their Lord responding soon!
Some are called in heat of midday, others late in afternoon;
Even as the sun is setting, some are sent into the fields,
There to gather in the bounty that God's Word so richly yields!" (LSB 827:2)**

And isn't this what our God calls upon each of us to do throughout our Christian lives; to reflect God's generosity to other people too?

I certainly wouldn't begin to tell anyone else here **HOW TO MANAGE THEIR CAREER**, but if God has blessed your tireless work and endless devotion to your chosen career, evident in the large amounts of money you may now have at your disposal, **couldn't you sometimes provide some gigantic discounts** to those people now and again who are suffering hard times, but still in need of your services.

I always enjoy hearing about **THOSE DOCTORS AND DENTISTS** who may take two weeks away from their own medical practices, to set up shop in some third world country, to give their help to others like this in a most meaningful way!

Or maybe you've just enjoyed a **GREAT MEAL IN A FABULOUS RESTAURANT**, when the young man or young woman waiting on your table has carefully attended to your every need and to that of your guests, so that you might even find a deep sense of personal pleasure in rewarding them with an especially generous tip; not only 15% or 20%, but maybe even 40%, not because you have to **BUT BECAUSE YOU ARE GENEROUS LIKE GOD AND LOVE TO PUT A SMILE ON OTHER PEOPLES' FACES TOO!** You don't do this every time you receive your bill, or "check," as we like to call it at a restaurant, but once in a while it certainly would be nice!

Maybe your service was not so good, or not "so hot," but since you have no idea what kind of unfortunate circumstances that waiter or waitress may be facing in their personal lives, you decide to become generous to them too!

Reflecting the generosity of God to others! I believe that St. Paul must have been a master at this when you consider the fact that he sometimes turned down any kind of financial compensation for his work.

DID ST. PAUL BELIEVE THAT FULL-TIME WORKERS IN THE CHURCH SHOULD BE SALARIED? Indeed he did and he says so in many places! In **I CORINTHIANS 9:11**, Paul writes: *"If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much to reap material things from you?"* In **GALATIANS 6:6**, he writes: *"One who is taught the Word must share all good things with the one who teaches."*

And Paul didn't merely receive a one-time gift from the church at Philippi; he received gifts from them on a number of occasions. Even when Paul was in another city, the Philippians continued to send material support to him which Paul continued to accept.

BUT THERE WERE TIMES WHEN HE REFUSED COMPENSATION FROM SOME CHURCHES WHERE THERE WERE ADVERSARIES OF HIS WHO CLAIMED THAT PAUL WAS ONLY SERVING IN FULL-TIME MINISTRY FOR THE MONEY! And immediately after acknowledging his right to receive financial compensation from the Corinthians, he refuses to do so for he goes on to say in **I CORINTHIANS 9:15-16**, *"Nevertheless we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the Gospel of Christ!"*

Paul was an excellent example of reflecting God's generosity to others! This man, who traveled extensively throughout the Roman world, preaching and teaching, also worked a "day job" from which **he earned money through his manual labor of being a tentmaker.**

But Paul reflects the generosity of God to others in many other ways too! Regardless of the challenges that were set before him, he maintains a very thankful spirit. In the opening words of his letter to the Philippians from which our epistle lesson is taken today, even though he was under house arrest in the city of Rome awaiting a trial, the verdict from which could have gone in either one of two ways, he maintains **A VERY THANKFUL SPIRIT.** He writes in **PHILIPPIANS 1:3**, *"I thank my God in my every remembrance of you always, in every prayer of mine for you all, making my*

prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the Gospel from the very first day until now!"

PAUL MAINTAINS A THANKFUL SPIRIT EVEN DURING THE TIME OF HIS IMPRISONMENT. LISTEN TO WHAT HE WRITES IN OUR EPISTLE LESSON TODAY: *"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain! If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith!" (Phil. 1:21-25)*

As I studied the appointed Scriptures for this morning's worship service, I was reminded of a powerful truth that the Bible shares with us again and again; that's made all the more prominent through Jesus and his ministry, and through the ministry of the apostles and evangelists who continue his work even after he has ascended into heaven. And **THIS GREAT PARADOXICAL TEACHING IS THAT CHRISTIANS CAN REJOICE IN THE MIDST OF ANY SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES.**

JESUS MAKES THIS VERY PLAIN TO US IN HIS BEATITUDES: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of God! Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy!" (Matthew 5:1-12)*

St. James writes, *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing!" (JAMES 1:2-4)*

In **ROMANS 5** we read, *"Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us!"*

In his letter to the Philippians, **PAUL IS OFFERING A SINCERE, NOR-SARCASTIC THANK YOU TO GOD; AND A THANK YOU FOR WHAT? FOR THE PRIVILEGE NOT ONLY OF BELIEVING IN CHRIST, BUT ALSO FOR THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING COUNTED WORTHY TO SUFFER FOR CHRIST!** Most of us wouldn't view our being **IMPRISONED, SHIPWRECKED, AND BEATEN AS A PRIVILEGE.** Most of us don't view the sacrifices that we make to put others ahead of ourselves and to make their lives better a pure privilege!

Although Paul confesses in our epistle lesson today that he would prefer to die and be with Christ, he realizes that continuing and laboring for the Philippians, even while he is in prison, is better for them. Paul is determined that Christ will be exalted in his body, whether by life or by death. Paul can smile and say thank you to God, because he has learned to set and reset his own personal focus on the presence of Christ and his mission as Christ's servant.

There a popular song that was first written by Charlie Chaplin, but later revised by John Turner in 1954 with the title "**SMILE.**" I imagine that most of us would be familiar with the song. It's been sung and recorded by such great musical artists as **JUDY GARLAND, MICHAEL JACKSON** and **NAT KING COLE**, two of which were very unhappy people whose lives were cut short, no doubt, by their immense struggle with depression; namely, Judy Garland and Michael Jackson.

Most recently at the **2014 EMMYS**, just before Billy Crystal's touching tribute to comedian Robin Williams, Sara Bareilles sang a poignant verse of the song as images of television personalities who had died in the past twelve months were flashed on the movie screen.

Smile though your heart is aching; smile even though it's breaking.

When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by—if you just smile through your fear and sorrow;

Smile and maybe tomorrow, you'll see the sun come shining through for you, if you just smile!

As she sang the "Smile" lyrics with a sad expression on her face, I finally realized why this song has always left me with mixed emotions. I feel **JOY** because it's a beautiful tune and a lovely sentiment, but I feel **SORROW** because it gives a smile much more power than it has without **SOMEONE ELSE BEHIND IT TO BACK IT UP**, and that Someone just happens to be our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has become for us: "Christ the life of all the living, Christ the death of death our foe; Christ yourself for us once giving, to the darkness depths of woe, by your suffering death and merit, I eternal life inherit, thousand, thousand thanks are due, dearest Jesus unto you!" (LUTHERAN WORSHIP, HYMN 94)

There are times in each of our lives also, dear friends, when adversity can put great sorrow in our hearts, as adversity put great sorrow in St. Paul's heart from time to time; adversity that may even one day make us yearn for death ourselves. But as St. Paul focuses his thoughts on what God has done for him in sending his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, to become his constant life's companion along the way, it also puts a **SMILE** on his face. Christ within him puts a smile on his heart. Christ empowers him to say "THANKS A LOT!" to God, even while he is in prison.

Christ insures a bright future for Paul and for the Philippians and also for every one of us, as we hold fast to our faith in God in times of comfort and in times of great challenge that lie ahead. Amen