



September 20, 2020
Matthew 20:1-16
“Gratefulness: A New Normal?”
Rev. Albert Thompson

Early July, 1997, I was in our camper trailer along the Boulder River in South Central Montana at the UCC Conference camp. I was in the middle of an eight-week sabbatical leave from First Congregational UCC Mankato, MN. I had two principal goals for the time away. I really needed some physical activity. I had arranged to provide five afternoons of physical labor. The camp would provide a riverside location for camper, electricity and meals. The second goal was to have large blocks of uninterrupted time for reading. To that end I had brought along a variety of books.

Seated at my reading place in front of the camper along the river, I took up “Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to life in Fullness” by the Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast. Little did I know as began to read that this book would be a life changer. It provided then and continues to provide a key reference point for life in God’s Unconditional Love; Gratefulness for the givenness of life.

The story of laborers in the Vineyard only appears in the Gospel According to Matthew. It is immediately preceded by the story of the rich young man who ask

“What he most I do to have eternal life”. Jesus listed off the Commandments. The young man replied “I have done all these. What do I still lack? . Jesus said: “If you really want to give it all, go sell all of your possession and give the money to the poor.” When the young man heard this, he went away grieving because he had many possessions. Upon hearing this the disciples cried out in despair “Then who can be saved? Jesus replied: “For mortals it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.”

So we come to the story of “The Laborers in the Vineyard” or perhaps “The story of the Generous Manager”.

The story begins “For the Kin-dom of God is like . . . The manger hires workers at the beginning of the day agreeing to give them a full-days wage. The manager than proceeds to enlist and send more workers to the fields throughout the day. At the end of the day, he calls the workers to pay them for their labor. Beginning with the ones who worked the shortest time, he pays each group of the less than full day workers a full-days wage. Lastly, he pays the agreed upon full days wages to those who worked the full day.

The story continues **Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, ‘These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.’**

Can we feel their anger? Their sense of being devalued. How else might they have responded? They could have taken their wages and left. Perhaps even feeling good about their labor. But they choose to feel devalued.

The story concludes;

The manager **“replied to the one speaking for the rest, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn’t we? So, take it and go. I decided to give to the ones who came last the same as you. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?’”**

We aren’t told how the other workers responded. They simply disappeared from the story. It seems to me that the point of the story does not rest in the pay/work ratio. The more I have lived with this, the more it seems that this is a story about givenness. The workers were all paid, given what the manager decided to give. After all the story begins, “For the kin-dom of God is . . .

The full day laborers were surprised . . . and their response as not simply taking the pay they had earned. Who knows, they might even had been grateful for the work. That doesn’t matter to the story. **What matters is their response to the givenness of the situation.**

At the beginning of the book, Br. David talks about the surprises that come when we recognize the “givenness” of life. He writes “We live in a given world, indeed in the givenness of the world” Continuing

“ A rainbow always comes as a surprise. Not that it cannot be predicted. Surprising sometimes means unpredictable, but it often means more. Surprising in the full sense means somehow gratuitous. He continues: “ Even the predicable turns into surprise the moment we stop taking it for granted.” The rainbow is given. How do we respond?

In her book, “Living in Gratitude: A Journey That Will Change Your Life” Angeles Arrien writes: “Gratitude is essentially the recognition of the unearned increments of value in one’s experience.” She goes on to say: “Gratitude is a feeling that spontaneously emerges from within. However, it is not simply an emotional response; it is also a choice we make. We can choose to be grateful, or we can choose to be ungrateful—to take our gifts and blessings for granted. As a choice, gratitude is an attitude or disposition.”

Considering the response of grousing workers, we need to ask “What is it that gets in the way of choosing to be grateful?” Conversely, what is it that brings forth the Kin-dom of God?

Professor of Psychology at UC Davis, Robert Emmons writes that it is the sense of entitlement that gets in the way. The capital “I” speaking forcefully “I deserve it. I have earned . I am entitled. It is this emphasis upon the “I” that gets in the way. Since childhood I have certain entitlements because of who and how I am. If my life choices are based in my sense of entitlement upon what I earn, what I know, who I am, then I am unable to see the givenness of life.

In his March 1863 Proclamation for a National Fast Day, Abraham Lincoln wrote in part: “We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation ever has grown; but we have forgotten God! We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Emmons speaks of the Narcissism of our culture, indeed the sense of entitlement grows out of that narcissism. To lesser or greater degree at some points in our lives, we are all narcissists. It is especially so in the case of our dominant, highly individualistic, white culture. Simply put, when we feel that we are entitled, we are unable to recognize and accept, the givenness of your lives. To the extent that we are unable, unwilling to see beyond our selves and our need, to see the givenness of life, we are unable to choose gratefulness. Emmons put it plainly: “A preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our benefactors, or to feel that we are owed things from

others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful.”

So, having said all of this about what gets in way of gratefulness, how is that we can choose to be grateful?

It begins with looking deeply for the givenness of our lives. It is surprising, even shocking to discover all that we have been given. If you have not already begun to reflect back upon your life, please do so. You will be surprised and that surprise may well be unpredictable as Br David said. Indeed it may well be shocking!

How well I remember my surprised outburst of anger in a diverse and mixed meeting on racism, when I was told that I was a racist. I remember my embarrassment, my utter humiliation in that moment at my rage. It was only as I begin to feel and understand with my heart and mind the givenness of my birth as white male born in 1945, that I could begin to move out my self-centeredness, out of what I learned to know was my isolation. In so doing, I begin to see others as others, begin to reach out, and begin to experience gratefulness. **My experience of the moment is best described by Br David “a (an) inch of surprise can lead to a mile of gratefulness.”**

Discovering how much we have been given leads to humility. Again Emmons. “Humility is a key to gratitude because living humbly is the truest approach to life. Humble people are grounded in the truth that they need others. We all do. We are not self-sufficient.”

Like the labors, we are faced regularly with choices. Do we choose to tighten our tenacious albeit futile grip on what **I** have, what **I** need, what **I** am ENTITLED TO and live isolated and unhappy? or Do we choose to accept the givenness of life choosing to humbly live gratefully? I

When I look back at my family, the neighborhood at 4208 Ewing Ave So, Minneapolis, Lynnhurst Congregational Church. My only response can and must be to live out the gratefulness I feel. How about you? What choices will you make?

What choices will we, the participants in United Church of Christ Parker Hilltop make as we come to grips with our givenness as a church? In gratefulness. I will close with this given:

“We exist as a church because we believe the Good News of Jesus Christ: that God's unconditional love, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives meaning and purpose to life.”

Gratefulness A New Normal! May it be so! Amen!