

God's Kingdom of Generosity Summer Benton

When our family lived in Cambodia were friends with a lovely Anglican priest from India named Raju. In the early stages of getting to know Raju he invited us to lunch with him and several other people after church one Sunday. We had a couple of kids at that point and it was after church when everybody is a bit tired and hungry so we gladly accepted this invitation to join Raju at his friends' restaurant around the corner from the church. We had never been there before and didn't know what to expect. Raju was friends with the owner but we didn't know them ourselves and we didn't really know Raju all that well at that point either.

We arrived and sat down at a long table and started chatting to our fellow guests. After quite some time somebody came and brought us water to drink. Nobody brought out menus. Raju said – "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything and order for all of us."

Quite a bit of time passed and the kids were starting to get grouchy. I was starting to get grouchy. You could tell that several of us were looking around for any signs that food might be coming soon. In my head I was thinking about ways I might be able to politely excuse our family from this lunch and take the kids home to feed them. But being a bit unsure how to do that gracefully, we just kept waiting.

Finally after an incredibly long period of time the waiter brought out some small plates of food – some crispy cracker type things. We were all so hungry that we devoured them quickly. Then a good bit of time later the waiter brought out some more small plates of food – something else that was clearly an hors d'oeuvres or starter of some sort. It wasn't particularly good. And again, we were so hungry that we devoured it quickly. And this continued, with several rounds of small plates being brought out and all of us were so unsure of how much more was coming or if there was enough for all of us to have our share that we ate everything that was put in the middle of the table. We were finally full.

And then the waiters came out again. This time with gorgeous main dishes. Slow cooked meats, curries, beautiful meals of exotic foods full of flavor. Way better than the cracker type things and other starters we had been served first. But by then we were too full and we couldn't enjoy ourselves.

Our host had planned a beautiful banquet but our greediness and fear of hunger prevented us from fully enjoying that banquet. Now, we didn't know our host. We had never met them before. We did know the person who brought us there, but not well and not enough that we trusted him or trusted that there would be enough.

The Bible gives us this imagery of a banquet table and God's provision for us as his children over and over again in scripture. From the very beginning, in Genesis with the story of creation, we are given a picture of the incredible generosity of God.

And we are told we should also be generous. Not because that will put us right in the eyes of God, but because by doing so we are living into the nature of God and his Kingdom. We are also told that we should not worry about whether or not God will provide for us. Matthew 6 says; “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” And it’s out of that trust in the provision of our Heavenly Father that we are called into generosity.

Today we read the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew’s gospel. Which is, among other things, another story that Jesus told to help us to see that God’s kingdom is not like Kingdoms of this world.

Last week Andy talked about how in our society today those who are land or property owners are seen as among the most fortunate because they own a piece of earth, a place that’s theirs – but Jesus tells us that actually it’s the meek that will inherit the earth.

God’s kingdom is upside down in comparison with the kingdoms of the world. And unlike most of the kings in Jesus’ day, God – as ruler in God’s Kingdom – is ultimately generous. He promises to be generous to us and calls us to be generous to those around us and be generous to him.

But how are we meant to do that when we live in a world that is so broken and when there are things like poverty and hunger all around us? If we are ultimately generous with our possessions, with our money, how can we be sure that we will have enough? After all, we see people all around us who don’t have enough.

It’s hard to do that. And the only way we will ever be able to is by knowing God and his character intimately and by trusting him. We have to trust in him that what he says is true – he will provide.

For the past 12 years I have been living on faith, faith that God will provide for my needs and the needs of our family – specifically our financial needs. We have been living on the generous donations of others who feel called by God to support the ministry God has called us to since 2008. Have we had moments in those 12 years when we were afraid we wouldn’t have enough? Absolutely. Did we always trust in God’s generosity? Sadly, no. But not one time in those 12 years were our needs not met. God has provided absolutely everything we have needed.

When we were discerning leaving Cambodia and our ministries there, Guy and I felt called to New Zealand, largely through a burden God placed on our hearts for the church here. New Zealand society is a lot more secular than my home in America. People here are moving further and further away from the church at a frighteningly fast rate. The age of Christendom is well and truly past and we have our work cut out for us. At the parish of Lower Hutt we have adopted the core values of Discipleship, Togetherness, and Reaching our Local Community. Together, as

Disciples of Christ, in order for us to show those around us that God's Kingdom is here and it's big and it's generous and invite them into that Kingdom with us, we must be generous too. We must give to the ministry of Jesus' church. We must give to those around us who are in need. We must feed the hungry, clothe the naked. And we must do it radically - radical generosity that mimics the radical generosity of God and points people to Him and His kingdom.

And if we do that, if we give generously in all the areas God speaks to our hearts to give, do you know what will happen? We will know Jesus more intimately and we will bear witness to the generous love of God more deeply and we will be participating with the Holy Spirit in bringing about God's kingdom on this earth.

Today was meant to be stewardship Sunday, and I guess it still is. But since we aren't meeting in our buildings it looks a bit different to stewardship Sundays we have had in the past.

I looked up the word stewardship as I was preparing this sermon because I wanted to understand how that word might relate to the concept of generosity besides the fact that both make us think about money. The first definition that popped up on my google search said that stewardship is *the job of supervising or taking care of something, such as an organization or property*. And I understand why that word has been used to talk about giving to the church, because we are called to be stewards of Jesus' church on this earth. We should be taking really good care of it. But I think there's an important distinction to make when we talk about stewardship in the church versus stewardship in another group or organisation. Because the church is ultimately not ours, it's the Holy Spirit's. So if we are going to exercise stewardship over God's church we must do so in line with God's Kingdom. And that needs to look quite different than other organisations in our society -- radically generous, in a fight for righteousness, loving and serving the last, the lost, and the least.

Whenever we make it back into our buildings the church staff will have stewardship packs for all of you to be able to make pledges of giving to the church for the coming year. This is important, we need to be able to function as a legal, financial entity and be able to write a budget and plan for the coming year. But my challenge to you all between now and when you receive one of those packs is this. Let's take our hearts before the Lord and ask him to show us his generosity. And ask him to guide us in how to be generous ourselves - not just with our money but also with our time, in our emotional energy, and with our love. Rather than simply deciding on a dollar amount to give to the church next year, let's come together and ask God to show us how to live in His generous Kingdom.

Amen.