

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 21, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"BECAUSE I AM GENEROUS"

Matthew 20:15

I would like you to think of a time when you were treated generously, when you received more than you expected, more than you deserved. The other day I remembered a time it happened to me. Some of you know that I was born and raised on a farm. Our farm was on a busy 2 lane highway. In the spring for five or six years my father planted sweet corn in a front field. Then during August I had a good business selling corn from the back of a truck to passing motorists. The first year we sold corn for 35 cents a dozen but by the last year it had risen to a dollar a dozen. Anyway, one September, I believe in was 1970 when I was 15, after the corn season ended, a neighbour asked me if I would sell apples from his orchard one weekend. We both figured I would sell a few hundred dollars worth from our strategically located driveway. He said he would pay me for my time. The weather was glorious, the apples were red, but business was slow. I think I sold \$80 worth of apples. On Monday when he came to pick up the unsold apples, I handed him the \$80 and figured he might pay me \$10. That's about how much work I'd done. Instead, he peeled off two twenty dollar bills and handed them to me, way more than I expected and far more than I deserved. Now \$40 was a big deal in 1970. It became my spending money for the whole school year. When you are treated with such unexpected generosity, you feel surprised and unworthy of the gift, but grateful, nonetheless.

In Matthew chapter 20 Jesus told a parable. A landowner went to the village labour market at 6 AM to hire workers to pick grapes. He agreed with them for the usual daily wage and sent them into the vineyard. At 9 A.M. he went back for more workers and agreed to pay them what was right and took them to his vineyard. He did the same at 12 Noon, 3 P.M., and then again at 5 PM, an hour before quitting time. And when it came time to pay the workers, he gave them all the same amount - a denarius, the usual daily wage. Naturally, the first-hired resented being made equal to the late workers. They had borne the day's burden and the hot scorching sun. They expected more. But the owner said to them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. This is the amount we agreed on. Take what belongs to you and go. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew

20:15) Well, the owner was generous to the late comers and those workers would have been happy indeed. Their families would have a good meal that night. Now we can understand why the first hired workers grumbled but they were not treated unfairly. They received what had been agreed upon.

Jesus is telling us that God's nature is marked by generosity. "Because I am generous." God treats people generously. God gives us more than we earn; and more than we deserve. God is generous to us.

And we all need God's generosity. Do you think those first-hired workers toiled hard and diligently all day? You know human nature and so do I. You think they didn't goof off or sit in the shade when the owner drove into town to get more workers? Did they really earn the full denarius? Maybe some of the later workers picked as many grapes as the first-hired. Now the first-hired had an advantage. They had the security of knowing they would get a days wage. The later workers spent much of the day anxiously wondering if they too would be called into the vineyard. But the point is that all the workers, even the first-hired were dependant on the owners generosity. For even the call to go into the vineyard, whether it came early or late, came from the owners generosity.

Some of us came early into God's vineyard, while others of us came later. Truthfully as Gentiles none of us were there at the first call. We are among those called later. And though I've been in the church all my life, there have been times when toiling for God and doing his will were far from my thoughts. Hasn't it been the same for you? Have we always been good workers and faithful stewards in God's vineyard? Yet here we are, held fast by the love of God in Jesus Christ and holding fast to the glorious promises of the Gospel. We are here because of God's grace. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do are you envious because I am generous?" God is generous to us.

In God's Kingdom it's always a matter of grace, not of earning or deserving. Now that's hard to grasp in a world based on earning and deserving. Is this person qualified to be President? Does that one have enough experience to be Vice-President? Is he or she worthy of such and such a job or such and such a position? Have they earned it? Now these are necessary questions from an earthly perspective, but when it comes to God's Kingdom, they have no meaning. For none of us by our own striving can open the door to God's Kingdom or make ourselves worthy of entering in. But in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God paid our sin debt and opened the door for all. The gift of Christ to save a fallen, grumbling world is the greatest sign of God's generosity. And each of us who responds by faith to God's call enters in. Even

the call to come into God's Kingdom is a gift. "...Because I am generous," says God. God is generous to us. He gives us not what we earn or deserve, but what we need. In fact, as sinners we deserve eternal separation from our Holy God; but look at what we get. Because God is generous we get new life, eternal life through Jesus Christ.

And if a late-comer answers God's call and enters God's family who are we to complain? It all comes from God's generous heart, for us and for them, too. The only advantage some of us have is that we've lived in the realm of grace a bit longer. Sure, it may sometimes seem that others have it easier. But don't look at what they have. Look at what God has given you! In fact, it's not that God treats us fairly, for fairness is not our need. If we demand fairness from God we won't make it. But thankfully God goes beyond fairness to treat us with undeserved generosity.

Now some of us here today still need to say "Yes" to God's call in Jesus Christ. We've held ourselves back and never really entered into a loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If you are in that place, you are invited to step forward into God's family by personally accepting Christ as your Saviour. Or some of us here today have said "Yes" to God's call, but we've never really grasped the wonder of God's grace. If you are there, you are invited to stop striving to earn God's favour and allow yourself to enjoy God's generosity. You are invited to live gratefully and joyfully as one who has been saved and secured by God's amazing grace. You are invited to take full hold of your status as a beloved and heaven-bound child of God.

"...because I am generous." God is generous to us. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could really see God's generosity all around us? The ripe apples on the trees, so heavy that they fall to the ground on their own, the tomatoes in the garden, so abundant that we love to give them away, the love and forgiveness poured out for us on the Cross, the strength that upholds us, the hope that sustains us, the people that love us? Our lives, indeed the life of the world happens because God is generous. And if there are people who don't have enough of God's gifts, the problem lies not with God, but with those who hoard God's bounty. Oh, that God would open our eyes to see his generosity.

And not only to see it, but to let our lives and our actions be shaped by it. Do you remember the movie "Wall Street" starring Michael Douglas as Gordon Gecko, a hard-driving and devious Wall Street stock trader. I saw it on TV again not long ago. A very appropriate movie to reflect on in this time of financial turmoil. In one scene, Gecko is making a speech to a group of executives and the theme of his address is "Greed is Good." Well, as we discovered last week, greed is not good, not even on Wall Street. In God's realm, the theme is quite

the opposite. In God's vineyard "Generosity is Good." Generosity is the keynote of God's action and attitude towards his creation. And so it becomes the keynote and the theme of God's people.

One year at our Annual Craft Sale, a child bought some candy from a table for 50 cents and handed the woman behind the table a loonie. As she turned around to get two quarters, the little girl said, "Keep the change." "Keep the change." That is the kind of attitude we are invited to have when it comes to supporting the church. We are encouraged to think not in terms of the minimum we can give, but the maximum we can give. When it comes to service, we are invited to think of the needs of the church community, not just our narrow self-interest. God is generous to us, and his generosity shapes our own actions and attitudes.

One Sunday the minister of a church seemed rather preoccupied and the congregation became concerned. His sermon seemed to ramble. Just before the benediction he said, "You know my wife and I have a daughter...she was living in a way we didn't approve of. She left home, and we hadn't seen her...until we found her the other day in an apartment with no heat, no hot water, no electricity. We also found her with our grandson, three months old. We asked her if she wanted to come home, and she said yes, she would. Many of you in the congregation will not approve of her living in your parsonage. But she's our daughter and we love her. There are two doors to this church. Perhaps some of you won't be able to shake my hand this morning. And that's OK. I'll understand, if you go out the other door." So he pronounced the benediction and went to the door and waited. That Sunday everyone went to the back door to shake the minister's hand. And in the coming weeks the people opened their loving arms to that young mother and her child. Clothes arrived. A job was found so that the young lady could make her own way. Babysitters appeared from the congregation so she could go to work. Generosity overflowed.

Now some in the community began to talk. "Did you hear about the minister's daughter who is going to church now? And they're letting her in!" But then people who had not attended church in years began to show up. They had not felt good enough to attend before. But now they realized that not being good enough was exactly the reason they could and should attend.

Look, the church has standards which we uphold, for we believe they are God's standards for our blessing. But not one of us has always kept those standards. We all need God's generosity. And God is generous to us. Our very lives and all our hopes depend on God's generosity. "Because I am generous," says God. May your life and my life and our church life reflect the generosity of our generous God.

