

Servants of a generous God

Matthew 20:1-16

September 21, 2014

Corina. Zoe. Emily. Arlo. McKenzie. Jack. Nevaeh. Teddy. Allison.

Who are these?

These are our children. These are our children's children.

What do we want for them?

We want them to be healthy. We want them to be happy. We want them to have opportunities and successes. We want them to see beauty and experience wonder. We want them to live lives that are long and full and good. We want them to know joy. We want them to know God.

So what do we do?

We feed them and clothe them and send them to school. We read to them and take them on hikes. We advocate for them and we pray for them,. We give them hugs.

Why do we do all this?

Because of what we want for them. Because we love them.

Rosa. Maria. Jesus. Julio. Miriam. Rosita.

Who are these?

These are our children. They are children of Chinandega, Nicaragua, but they are our children, too.

What do we want for them?

We want them to be healthy. We want them to be happy. We want them to have opportunities and successes. We want them to see beauty and experience wonder. We want them to live lives that are long and full and good. We want them to know joy. We want them to know God.

So what do we do?

We feed them and put together shoeboxes for them. We build them schools and collect books for them. We bring them bicycles and sewing machines. We advocate for them and we pray for them and give them hugs.

Why do we do all this?

I have said it already. Because they are our children, and because we are not jealous of our love, or of God's.

Joseph. Emmanuel. Johnny. Frank. Sans Parole.

Who are these?

These are my brothers. They are Haitians, residents of the Sans Fils Hospital for the Destitute and Dying in Port-au-Prince, young men afflicted, young men dying, with AIDS or tuberculosis or both, but they are my brothers, too.

What do I want for them?

I want them to be healthy. I want them to be happy. I want them to have opportunities and successes. I want them to see beauty and experience wonder. I want them to live lives that are long and full and good. I want them to know joy. I want them to know God.

So what do I do?

I feed them and talk with them. I shave them and trim their nails. I bathe them and massage them and give them medicines. I advocate for them and I pray for them and I touch them.

Why?

I have said it already. Because they are my brothers. Because I will not be jealous of my love, or of God's.

Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?

There it is: jealousy again! Remember the distinction I made between jealousy and envy. Envy resents what someone else has that it doesn't have, while jealousy guards closely what it does have because it doesn't want anybody else to have it!

The workers hired first thing in the morning are not envious of the workers hired late in the day. They don't want for themselves the one silver coin those workers were paid. They have their silver coin. They resent that the owner of the vineyard paid the last-minute workers the same wage. That wage was their right, their prerogative, their money. They earned it!

Sound familiar?

"Why should I have to give up my hard-earned money to subsidize them? Tell 'em to get a job!" Do you know people who are resentful of others who "have it easy," who are given an extra break, who are given handouts, who are given special consideration? Are you one of those people?

Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?

Who is talking? The owner of the vineyard. But who is the owner of the vineyard in Jesus' story? It is God! Are we jealous of God's generosity, of God's blessing, of God's grace, of God's love? Is it our right? Our prerogative? Have we earned it? Do we get upset when God seems to give away his love and his blessing and his grace too easily, to people who don't deserve it ... at all?

We can be jealous of God's love, wanting to guard it closely and keep it for ourselves and people like us. Churches can be jealous, too. That's why we are undertaking this journey as a church this fall, exploring for ourselves the worship styles and traditions of our neighbors, to try to shake a little bit of our jealousy loose! So today we walk for a while in the footsteps of the Roman Catholic church.

The Roman Catholic church has been a jealous church. It has been protective, often fiercely protective, of its rights, its prerogatives, its authority, its power. It has, until recently, laid claim to be the one true church, deeming anyone and everyone outside the church as outside and without the grace of God.

The jealousy of the Roman Catholic Church is seen most clearly here, at the table. The church is jealous of the grace offered here, judging for itself who may come and who may not, who is welcome and who is not.

Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?

God is always more generous than we are. God is always more generous than we are! Any of us. All of us.

Do you suppose the Roman Catholic church is the only jealous church? We are all the same. God is always more generous than we are, stretching and challenging the limits of our generosity, stretching and challenging the limits of our welcome, stretching and challenging and tearing down the limits we put on our love. God is always more generous than we are, because God is ... God!

That's what I want to talk about, not jealousy, but generosity. I want to talk about the servants of a generous God.

This is what I know to be true. This is what I have seen for myself. Wherever people are poor, in this nation and in this world, wherever people are suffering, in this nation and in this world, servants of God, specifically Roman Catholic servants of God, are there. The institution may have its struggles with jealousy, as all our institutions do, but there is a heart of generosity planted by Jesus and nurtured by the Spirit which has been a hallmark of this church from its beginning, which, of course, was also our beginning.

Wherever you go, you will find them: Mother Teresa in Calcutta, Oscar Romero in San Salvador, Father Marco Desi in Chinandega, and countless, countless more with names and in places you and I do not know, men and women, devoted servants of God, giving not time and money, but their very lives for the sake of brothers and sisters who are poor, for the sake of sisters and brothers who are suffering, feeding them, healing them, advocating for them, serving them, loving them.

The Roman Catholic church has a powerful, and, I would say, unmatched legacy, not merely of charity for the poor, but solidarity with the poor, of coming alongside, being alongside, being with, sharing life. Pope Francis wrote about this kind of solidarity in his "Gospel of Joy:"

With due respect for the autonomy and culture of every nation, we must never forget that the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity. It must be reiterated that "the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others." To speak properly of our own rights, we need to broaden our perspective and to hear the plea of other peoples and other regions than those of our own country. We need to grow in a solidarity which "would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny."

It's not just about money or things or education or opportunity. It's about dignity and fulfillment and fullness of life. It's about relationship.

I saw it for myself in Haiti, in Port-au-Prince, at the Hospital for the Destitute and Dying. I saw it in Clare Marie, Sister Clare Marie, the servant of a generous God. She was friendly and helpful and kind to me as I worked among the men at Sans Fils, but she was there for them. She was there with them.

She was a member of the order of Sisters of Charity, Mother Teresa's order, and being there, serving these men, was her vocation. She was very interested and talked with me about our pilgrimage to Haiti. She thought it a very good thing, but could not understand why we were staying just one week. Because, for her, it was not a mission trip or a project or a pilgrimage, it was her vocation. It was her life.

We were there just for a time, just for a brief moment of time. We came, we saw, and we left. But much of our purpose there was accomplished, because this was a pilgrimage of "reverse mission," "reverse" because it was not so much about what we had to give, but what we had to receive, not so much about serving other people in their poverty, but allowing them to serve us and teach us in our poverty.

Pope Francis understands this:

God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself "became poor" ... This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us ... Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.

This is what I wrote, at the end of my time in Haiti:

God is here because God has to be here. In Haiti, without God there is despair. God is hope and hope is God.

Sometimes [at home] it seems God is a luxury. People do just fine without God. There is no urgency, no pressing need, no deep longing.

Of course, that isn't true ... but it is especially untrue when we stop isolating ourselves from the rest of the world, when we recognize that their problem is our problem, that their urgency is our urgency ... when we stop thinking in terms of them and us.

This is one of the lessons that has most impressed me this week. It is not so much about caring for the needy, being compassionate, identifying with suffering ... It is a matter of recognizing the bond, seeing a brother, a sister, sensing / understanding / believing / living a common humanity ...

I am hungry, I am in pain, I have AIDS, I have TB, I have no job, I am dying ...

It's a matter of recognizing the bond, of acknowledging our common humanity, of seeing our brothers, our sisters, our children. What we want for them is what we want for us. And we shouldn't even say "them." This is what we want for us, all of "us:" to be healthy, to be happy, to have opportunities and successes and dignity, to see beauty and experience wonder, to live long and full and good, to know joy, to know God.

This is what we want and this is what God wants for us, and this is what God provides. So we come here, alike, eager to receive the gifts and blessing and love of a generous God. None of us have earned it. None of us "deserve" it. None of us are any more entitled than any other to receive it. We come, alike, all of us, with empty hands and empty souls, wanting to be filled ...