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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
September 18, 2011
Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 20:1-16
"Do All the Good You Can"

The gospel story today focuses on a generous land owner. It's about generosity.

It comes about in a strange, counter-intuitive way. The land owner pays all his day workers a full days wage irrespective of what time they were hired. One hour, three hour and six hour workers get the same pay as full day workers.

One can understand the gripe of the full day workers. The text reads: "Now when the first came (to get paid), they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'"

The owner of the vineyard responds: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

This seems unfair but it's absolutely fair. The land owner pays the first what he promised them and he gives the same to the others out of his generosity.

The story calls to mind the mostly Mexicans or Mexican-Americans who stand outside Bay Area hardware stores and along the industrial parts of San Rafael waiting for someone to offer them work. I bet they are paid an hourly wage. Even if they are hired late in the day most of them stand there the entire day waiting for work. In some ways it's as difficult to hang out idly all day as it is to work. Most of them would rather pass the day working.

I'm sure these dynamics fed into the thinking of the generous biblical land owner. Everyone has mouths to feed. Jesus prefaces the story by saying that the story is about the realm of God – and God's realm is one of generosity. The land owner told the workers hired later that he would give them "what is right." For the land owner it is right to be generous. For Jesus it is right to be generous.

The message then is that we belong to the community of the generous. We serve a generous God. I thought this when I saw the glorious full moon this week and when I looked at the surfer banking off the lip of a lovely wave in Kona, Hawaii on the calendar on my office wall given to me by a generous member of the church. Every beautiful and lovely thing given us in nature comes from the hands of a generous God.

Barbara Bacon-Shaw's arrival at Redwoods Presbyterian Church is a sign of a generous God. We are enriched by her coming. The Colossian text read today is a generous offering of words to us: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...and with gratitude in your hearts *sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs* to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him."

Our San Francisco Theological Seminary intern, Faith McClellan, is a generous gift of God to this church. We heard her story at the Saturday morning breakfast yesterday and I'm grateful that we are now part of her journey.

Our church is an expression of a generous God. God has given us to each other. We are generous in our relationship with each other and we are generous in mission. If we counted what we have given in mission dollars to local and global concerns over our hundred years of ministry here it would run into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The church by its nature is generous. We give of our time, talents and money. The gospel story speaks to the fullness of this. We live the truism spoken by MIT professor Noam Chomsky in a talk I heard this week when he said: "With privilege comes responsibility." As a community of the faithful we know that we are privileged in the sense that we are recipients of a generous God and we give to a world in need out of our gratitude.

This was not intended as a stewardship sermon but it must be with the gospel story before us today. I did not choose the text. It came with the lectionary. As stewards we are generous because we worship a generous God. The theme of a stewardship campaign in the first church I served in Jacksonville, Florida, was: "Giving says it all."

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, provides a way. He says:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

We do our best.

A wonderful way to close this sermon on generosity which has morphed into a stewardship message is to tell another story. It's an unlikely source but told by a master storyteller.

We don't associate novelist Stephen King with Christian theology and yet he has an amazing perspective on how we imagine giving to be. He points us in the right direction.

He recognizes that giving and generosity have a transcendent purpose and pleasure here and now.

“A couple of years ago,” he says, “I found out what ‘you can’t take it with you’ means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you’re lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.

“We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we’re just as broke. Warren Buffet? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going out broke. Tom Hanks? Going out broke. Steve King? Broke. Not a crying dime.

“All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade—all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. It’s still going to be a quarter-past getting late whether you tell the time on a Timex or a Rolex....

“So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan, anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on....

“Now imagine,” continues King, “a nice little backyard, surrounded by a board fence. Dad—a pleasant fellow, a little plump—is tending the barbecue. Mom and the kids are setting the picnic table: fried chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, a chocolate cake for dessert. And standing around the fence, looking in, are emaciated men and women, starving children. They are silent. They only watch.

“That family at the picnic is us; that backyard is America, and those hungry people on the other side of the fence, watching us sit down to eat, include far too much of the rest of the world (and some in the US): Asia and the subcontinent; countries in Central Europe, where people live on the edge from one harvest to the next; South America, where they’re burning down the rain forests; and most of all, Africa, where AIDS is pandemic and starvation is a fact of life.

“It’s not a pretty picture, but we have the power to help, the power to change. And why should we refuse? Because we’re going to take it with us? Please.

“Giving isn’t about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It’s for the giver. One doesn’t open one’s wallet to improve the world, although it’s nice when that happens; one does it to improve one’s self....

“A life of giving—not just money, but time and spirit—repays. It helps us remember that we may be going out broke, but right now we’re doing O.K. Right now we have the power to do great good for others and for ourselves.

“So I ask you,” concludes King, “to begin giving, and to continue as you begin. I think you’ll find in the end that you got far more than you ever had, and did more good than you ever dreamed.”

That's a wonderful interpretation of Jesus' story in the gospel text today. For Stephen King generosity makes good sense. For Jesus generosity is a way of life. Jesus is identified in the gospel story with a familiar "I am." It is "I am generous" (remember the line? "Or are you envious because I am generous") and he calls us through the story to be generous as well. That's *our* identification as followers of Christ.

Let us begin this new church year with grateful and generous hearts. God has given us much and we have much to give. Amen.