

As I begin my sermon this morning, I have a question that I'd like you to ponder—*what causes you to get up out of your seat and celebrate?* What kind of gift, or good news, or event, makes your heart sing and your feet dance?

Do you celebrate when you encounter beauty? Do you celebrate when you are made to feel loved? Does a birthday party, a wedding, a baby announcement, or a baptism move your heart to celebrate? When you make the team, or make the sale, or receive good news from your doctor, do you sing, shout, and give thanks to God?

This past week I was one of the volunteer coaches at our FLO Soccer Camp, and **Celebration** is one of the hallmarks of this camp. There are plenty of other soccer camps on the North Shore, but I can guarantee you this, no other camp celebrates like we do. We celebrate every student, every attempt, every new skill, and the character qualities that we see in the students.

- we celebrate by dancing and shouting;
- we celebrate by handing out trophies;
- we celebrate with leaf blowers;
- and, by throwing students, coaches, and parents into the air as high as we can. We had a random daycare stop by to watch what we were doing and Dana convinced one of the daycare workers to let us celebrate her—before she knew what was happening, this 50 something woman was up on the paddle board and 10 feet in the air with her co-workers filming her.

One of the most important things about celebration is making sure that everyone is in on it. In other words, when one person is being celebrated, we **all** celebrate. Someone watching from the outside

might wonder why we spend so much time celebrating. Do we do it because it makes students feel good? I suppose it does. When we celebrate others, they feel like they are valuable—and they are—but there is a deeper, theological, reason for our celebration focus. Everything worth celebrating points back to our Generous God. Everywhere we look we see signs of His mercy—we celebrate God's goodness wherever we find it, and, in whatever form His goodness comes.

James 1:17 says, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights*". We celebrate because God's goodness is present; even in difficulty, His generosity never runs dry.

This morning, we're going to take a closer look at a parable Jesus told about celebration. Let me encourage you to take your Bibles—paper or electronic—and turn with me to Matthew 20:1-16.

Two weeks ago, when Pastor Brendan began our Sermon Series, he laid out the purpose of the stories Jesus told. Jesus didn't tell stories primarily to entertain or to educate, but to expose what was in His hearers' hearts, and, to evoke a response. This morning's parable is a story about desperate need, generous provision, and celebration but like most of Jesus' stories this parable contains an unexpected twist. I don't want to give too much away, so allow me to read it to you now, and pay attention both to the story and to the response it evokes within you.

Matthew 20:1-16, "*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into*

*his vineyard. 3 “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ 5 So they went.*

*“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ 7 “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ 8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’*

*9 “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’*

*13 “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

This morning I’m going to preach my way through this parable but along the way I also want to offer a few principles for how to read

and study parables for yourself. As a pastoral team, our desire is that God will grow in you a passion for His word, and, that this passion will be accompanied by the necessary skills/tools to make sense of what you are reading.

Just a few moments ago I said that Jesus didn’t tell stories primarily to entertain or to educate, but to expose what was in His hearers’ hearts, and, to evoke a response. The two questions we must ask of every parable are:

- *What does this parable expose in my/our hearts?*
- *What response does Jesus call for?*

The answer to these two questions will allow us to apprehend the meaning and application of the parable. But in order to answer these questions, there are a few steps we must take. Here’s the first:

**1. We Need To Determine The Occasion For This Parable.** In other words, who is the original audience, and what prompts Jesus to tell the story? Jesus didn’t tell “random” stories to “random” people; His stories were targeted to specific people, arising from a particular set of circumstances.

To discover the occasion for our parable, we need to go back to Matthew 19, beginning at verse 1. Jesus had recently left His home town area in Galilee and headed towards Jerusalem; large crowds were following Him. Matthew 19 reveals that the crowd was “mixed;” everyone was there for their own reason. Some were there because they needed to be healed. Some were there to “test” Jesus; they considered Him a fraud and wanted to expose Him. Some parents were there because they wanted Jesus to bless their children. And Jesus’ disciples were there taking it all in.

*So, what prompts the telling of this story? Immediately before our parable, a rich young man stepped out of the crowd, and asked Jesus how he could live a life that was aligned with God's life. Jesus gave the young a man standard answer—*You know what kind of life that God approves of: don't murder, don't commit adultery, tell the truth, honour your parents, and love your neighbour the way you want to be loved.**

But this young man was serious about wanting to follow God; he was already doing what Jesus suggested, but he sensed there was something more. And when he asked about the next level of discipleship, Jesus said something personal and pointed: “*If you want to give it all you've got...go sell your possessions; give everything to the poor. All your wealth will then be in heaven. Then come follow me.*” *That was the last thing the young man expected to hear. And so, crestfallen, he walked away. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and he couldn't bear to let go.*”

Jesus presented the young man with a stark choice: *if you want to follow Me, your love of money has got to go—there's only room for one God in your life.* The same choice is presented to all would-be-disciples—*there's only room for one God in our lives; will it be Jesus, or something else?*

Well, the 12 disciples had a front row seat, and they watched the rich young man walk away—he prized his possessions more than following Jesus. Peter was there, and perhaps feeling a little smug

and self-righteous, blurted out “*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*”<sup>1</sup> Peter's response reveals a heart that is both beautiful and broken. On the one hand, we see his willingness to leave everything behind in order to follow Jesus—how wonderful, how appropriate. But on the other hand, we hear both a measure of entitlement, and, the notion of merit. *Now that we've left everything, what's in it for us? After all we've given up, what have we earned?*

Jesus, the Master Teacher and Lord of Life, replied: “*everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.*”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus reminds Peter that every sacrifice made in the pursuit of God is generously rewarded. In the light of eternity, our sacrifices are for but a moment, but when we follow Jesus, we walk a path that leads to an eternal, heavenly destination. We get far more from God than we could ever give to God.

As for the notion of merit, we never have God over a barrel—so to speak; God is never in a position where He is indebted to us, or owes us something. He created us, He sustains us—we are ever, and always, in His debt. God gives, and He gives, and He gives, and no matter how much God gives, His supply never runs out.

The rich young man walked away from Jesus, Peter didn't leave but he had a mixed up notion of merit, and in response to these two men,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:27 (The Message).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:29.

Jesus launched into the story I read earlier. We've walked through the occasion of the parable, let's now examine some of the details before we make our way to meaning and application.

## 2. Examining The Details:

- The **first** detail is drawn from Matthew 20:1, "*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.*"

This is a parable about what life is like when God is in charge; the kingdom of heaven refers to that realm where God rules and reigns, where His way is *the* way. In this parable, the landowner represents God—his actions reflect the values and priorities of God.

- **second**, there are several points of reference in our parable that were well-known to Jesus' original audience but are lost on modern audiences. Allow me to fill in the background for you.

The parable is connected to the real-life-practice of large landowners hiring seasonal workers to help with the harvest; a twelve hour work day was customary during the harvest, and a denarius was the standard wage. It was also customary for the day labourers to receive their wage at the end of each day—the reason being that they could then use this money to purchase food for their family that night.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 says, "*Do not take advantage of a hired*

*worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.*"

In the ancient world, families often lived hand-to-mouth, earning just enough money each day to purchase food.<sup>3</sup> Hence the 4th petition in the Lord's Prayer, "*Our Father in Heaven...give us each day our daily bread*" (Mt. 6:11). In the ancient world there was no such thing as Employment Insurance, Disability Insurance, Social Assistance, or a local soup kitchen; if you didn't find work for the day, you and your family didn't eat.

If a landowner was looking to hire workers, they would go to the marketplace to see who was available. In our parable, the owner went out early in the morning—likely 6 a.m.—and hired the workers he needed for the day. Those who weren't chosen would wait and hope that someone else would come by with an offer of work. If they were hired later in the day, they would be paid a reduced amount.

In our parable, the owner hires workers at 6 a.m, but then again at 9 a.m, noon, 3 p.m, and one last time at 5—1 hour before the end of the work day. The question is, *why? Was he an incompetent business owner, unable to calculate his labour needs for the day?* Jesus intends us to see something else in this strange hiring practicing. The

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<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, 664.

owner wasn't hiring to meet his own need for labour, he continued to add workers in order to meet the needs of hungry families.<sup>4</sup>

In the time remaining, let's turn our attention to the meaning and application of this parable. And in order to do so, I want to retell the story in such a way so as to include us all in it.

**3. Retelling The Story:** I want you to imagine waking up each morning feeling hunger pains, but more, feeling responsible for the hunger your spouse and children will feel the moment they awake. You wake up, wipe the sleep from your eyes, and slip out of the house as quietly as you can.

You limp down the path you've walked a thousand times before, your leg dragging as you go—you've never been the same since the accident. When you get to the marketplace, you see a sizeable crowd forming—your heart sinks—too many people for too little work. You ask yourself, "*Who will be chosen, and who will go home hungry?*"

An owner of a vineyard arrives and calls out his need for ten workers. Your quick mental calculation tells you that you've got a 50% chance of being chosen; you stand up tall and try to look bigger. Across the marketplace you see Simeon smiling a confident smile, and why not? Simeon was big and strong—and he was chosen immediately; next came Hannah—she's hard worker; then Jacob, then Sarah. Your name isn't called and you slump down beside your neighbour. There's no point going home... what are you going to tell your family? *Sorry, there's no work today; maybe we'll eat tomorrow.*

No, you're not going anywhere; it's still early and maybe someone else will be hiring.

At 9 a.m. the same owner returns, and calls out his need for four more. You spring to your feet, smooth down your hair, and try to hide your limp. Your name isn't called, but your neighbour's is—he mouths the words, "*I'm so sorry,*" as he walks away.

At noon the owner returns, this time he's looking for three more, and this time your name is called. The immediate feeling of relief is quickly crushed by the thought that the day is half over—*a half a day's wage for a half a day's work... that should give me just enough to by a chunk of day old bread. It's not a lot, but it will have to do.*

At 3 p.m., you see the owner return to his vineyard with two new hires—Judah and Benjamin; Judah hasn't been sober in 10 years. At 5 p.m.—one hour before quitting time—the owner escorts Rachel into the vineyard; poor Rachel is half-blind and wouldn't know a ripe grape from a stone.

By 6 p.m., the workday is done; you gather with the rest to receive your wage. Rachel was called first and a full day's wage was placed in her hand; next came Judah and Benjamin—for 2 hours of work they too received a full day's wage. Anticipation begins to rise in your heart—*a full day's wage? Will there be fresh bread and meat tonight?* When that denarius was placed in your hand, celebration broke out in your heart—you would have danced a jig if not for your leg.

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<sup>4</sup> R.T. France, *The New International Commentary the New testament: The Gospel Of Matthew*, 749.

Simeon was the first to be hired and the last to be paid, but to his surprise, he received the same amount as the rest of us. Immediately he began to grumble, *“Rachel, Judah, and Benjamin worked an hour or two and compared to me they’ve accomplished nothing, I’ve worked hard since morning, through the heat of the day, and yet you make them my equal? This is so unfair!”*

As Jesus’ parable concludes, we hear the owner justifying his generosity, *“I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ...I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

There’s a little test you can self-administer, one that will reveal whether you are a Simeon or a Rachel. As I read the parable earlier, **did you instinctively accuse the owner of being unfair, or, did you celebrate the generosity of the owner?** The owner realized that those who were hired last couldn’t possibly feed their families based on what they *should* be paid, and so he paid them 12x the going hourly rate.

We take it for granted that those who work longer, harder, or more “successfully” deserve the greater compensation; we are surprised—and perhaps offended—by the owner’s action because his values clash with our own.

**What does this parable expose?** Our own stinginess of heart, envy, and comparison, or the sense that earned our way through life and deserve more than others.

When it comes to the faith, we may have started well, entering the kingdom with awe and wonder, amazed at the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God. But over the years, has our posture shifted from gratitude and celebration to entitlement? *I’ve been faithful to you God, I’ve worked hard, sacrificed much, and what have I gotten for my labour?*

**What response does Jesus call for?** Gratitude—for what God has done for me, and, celebration of God’s generosity to others. The Simeon’s of this world think of themselves as earning their way with God—they act as though God owes them something; the Rachel’s of this world have come to rely on the grace and mercy of God. **The secret to the Christian life is understanding that from beginning to end, we’re all Rachel’s.** We never advance beyond our need for grace, and God’s generosity never fails.

We never have God over a barrel—so to speak; God is never in a position where He is indebted to us, or owes us something. He created us, He sustains us—we are ever, and always, in His debt. And yet, this isn’t how God thinks about our situation—our debt isn’t something that we could ever repay, nor is it something He asks us to repay. God gives, and He gives, and He gives, but no matter how much God gives to others, His supply for us never runs out.

Michael Wilkins writes, “We who have nothing of our own have been called to the kingdom of heaven and endowed with the privilege of being Jesus’ disciples...All that we are, everything that we have, all that we ever hope to accomplish is pure gift—and the only appropriate response is gratitude. Certainly we know that we will be

blessed for the work we do for our Master, but the reward pales in the light of the gift of life we have already received.”<sup>5</sup>

In Christ, we have been chosen; in Christ, we have been adopted into God’s family; in Christ, our past is have been forgiven and our glorious future is secure; in Christ, we are being healed, transformed, and set free; in Christ, we are marked by God’s power; in Christ, we are loved and called the friends of God.

**Conclusion:** In a few short hours, a few hundred of us from FLO Soccer Camp are going to make our way down to BC Place to watch the Whitecaps play the Portland Timbers. And I can guarantee you that if one of the Whitecaps puts a little round soccer ball into the back of the Timbers net, I will jump to my feet, pump my fist, and celebrate with joy.

But friends, we have something far greater, and infinitely more worthy of celebration—the God who made me, and you, loves us with an everlasting love. And through our Lord Jesus Christ, a way has been made for our sin to be forgiven, for our wounds to be healed, and our lives to be transformed. Death could not hold Jesus in the grave, and death will not be the end of us—one day we will rise, just as He did, and we will enter into a glorious life without end.

As we conclude this morning, Virgil is going to come and lead us in two concluding songs—let’s celebrate the goodness and generosity of God together.

### **Worship**

### **Benediction**

And now, “*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever.*”<sup>6</sup> And may “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wilkins, 666-667.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 1:17

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:14.