

# **“Generous to a Fault”**

September 21, 2008

Scripture: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

The Rev. William T. Hennessy

It may seem odd to talk about generosity considering all that’s happened in the stock markets this past week. Generosity may be the last thing on most folks’ minds right now. If anything a lot of us are looking for the nearest mattress under which to put our funds or digging holes in the backyard and drawing elaborate maps so we find what we’ve stashed. I suspect most people are thinking a lot more about how they can hang onto their money than about how they might give it away.

But, folks, harrowing as these things seem, and I did actually hear one reporter mention Armageddon in relation to the fall of Lehman Bros., humanity has survived worse. Bubonic plague comes to mind. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone we saw far greater economic and military devastation than what has happened on Wall Street. We’ll recover and maybe even be the better for it. In the meantime, though, we may need to resist the temptation to begin hoarding and closing ourselves off from the needs of others. Just as truth is the first casualty of war, generosity could become the first casualty of this economic disaster.

I think when we enter a period like this, when resources suddenly seem scarce, a sort of merit-based mentality can take over. We can start to think about everyone else in terms of what we think they deserve. Now that’s sort of our tendency as a culture anyway, but when anxiety is high that tendency can become exaggerated. And we can become very, very picky about when and how and to whom we are generous.

Now, Jonah was a person who understood that. He was an anxious prophet. So anxious, in fact, that when God actually called upon him he caught the first boat in the opposite direction. Jonah was called to go to Nineveh, warn them of God’s wrath and tell them to repent. His reluctance to do that doesn’t make much sense until we understand a few things about Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the ancient empire of Assyria. During the time in which the story of Jonah is set, Assyria was the mortal enemy of Israel. And in fact some time around 720 B.C., Assyria overran the northern kingdom of Israel and swallowed it whole. You may have heard of the 10 lost tribes of Israel? Assyria is the reason they were lost. The northern kingdom was wiped out of existence as a nation. So Assyria was a true threat.

Jonah had no desire to help Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, escape God’s wrath. That’s why he ran. But, of course, as we all know, it didn’t work. Jonah could not escape his call. He could not run from God’s irresistible generosity. And that is why we find him angry and depressed. Because of Jonah, Nineveh repented and God spared them. But as far as Jonah was concerned they did not deserve it.

When times are hard and anxiety is high, we see the world through a lens of scarcity. We want to have control over who will receive our generosity and who will not. And when we see those whom we believe are undeserving receiving care it’s hard not to resent them – them and the source of such indiscriminate, foolish generosity.

That's why the vineyard workers who had broken their backs all day were so angry. They were resentful because the owner was generous. Yet Jesus says that's what living in the kingdom of heaven is like. It's like working for an owner who is generous to a fault. And it can be maddening. It can be maddening because God refuses to be held to our standards of who is deserving and who is not. And God refuses to accept our assumption of scarcity. What we are convinced is in short supply is in fact abundant beyond our imagining. So God will not hold back on being generous.

In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells of the "new math of grace" and how encountering it sends people right up the wall. He tells of writing an article for a magazine in which he examined several examples of the atrocious mathematics in the gospels. Examples like Jesus' praising a few pennies from a poor widow and disparaging the elaborate gifts of the wealthy; or today's strange parable of an owner who pays the same wage to workers who were there all day as to those who only showed up for the last hour. Yancey was surprised to receive piles of hate mail from other Christians in response to his article. Many of his readers simply could not accept this image of God that is such a sharp contrast to our values. As he worked through all that he came across this quote from Frederick Beuchner:

*"People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the lamb..."*

When we find ourselves in circumstances that seem overwhelming and are out of our control we aren't prepared to keep ourselves planted firmly in God's kingdom. We get uprooted far too easily when the winds blow hard. Yet still we are included in God's kingdom of generosity. We're called to be, like Jonah, the instruments of that generosity, living it and celebrating it for all the world to see and be amazed at our foolishness. Also like Jonah, I suppose, we can run from that call. We can run from it, but we can never escape it.

For we are God's people of grace. We are God's chosen whether we're called in the morning or at noon or an hour before the work is done; we're called into the vineyard every one. So don't give up on the generosity God longs to reveal through you. Stay in the vineyard, stay in God's kingdom, no matter how many financial institutions collapse. Don't let yourself see your life through a lens of scarcity, but be generous even now...especially now, so the world will know God's kingdom is among us and God's true abundance is at hand.

Amen