

The service into which we are called

The moderator of the 136th General Assembly was the Rev. Dr. Herb Gale, who was the minister in Stouffville, and also in Guelph, before he became the person responsible for “planned giving” at the national office of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

“Planned giving”, of course, is associated with the idea of remembering the church in your will. It’s involved in giving of assets that you might have, such as property or stocks, etc. For example, one of the Presbyterian camps in the wider area is Gracefield; and the property for that was donated by the Billings family. When I grew up near Ottawa, we went to the Billings Gate Mall. Maybe some of you also went to the Billingsgate Mall. It was one of the first malls in Canada, as I understand. Well, that family donated the property on Lac Castor, Beaver Lake, north of Ottawa. Another fairly prominent family, the McLean family, associated with the McLean-Hunter company, who own McLean’s Magazine, donated the land for a retreat centre near Guelph, Ontario, called Crieff Hills Conference and Retreat Centre. Also, one of the laypersons associated with St. John’s Presbyterian Church in Cornwall donated money in order to create what he called “The Experimental Fund”. This would fund special projects within the church. Without donations of those sorts—and if we simply relied on weekly offerings—these camps, retreat centres, and experimental funds wouldn’t be in existence.

Well, Herb Gale, in his moderatorial year, made the great ship *Generosity* his theme; he wanted to have it set sail in a big way.

Generosity, I would say, is a theme in this parable from Matthew’s gospel, a parable of Jesus of the kingdom of heaven. “Or are you envious,” said to the landowner to one of the people who was complaining—“Are you envious, because I am generous?”

The parable, as it progresses, presents a number of points of view. The point of view of some of the workers is not—one would say—entirely generous. They simply see their work as to fill out the day, and to accomplish the work that is sent before them, and to be paid accordingly. The snag in the whole picture is that the landowner acts in a way that they find frustrating, because the landowner pays everyone an equal amount, even if the person has only been working for one hour, rather than for twelve hours. And, of course, that is manifestly unfair to these people who have been working during the heat of the day.

This, however, is a parable of the kingdom of heaven. And, when we see that it is a parable, we know already that we are to begin interpreting it. We are to begin trying to figure what is being told us here.

Now, in the parables of Jesus, the “landowner”, the “king”, is often a figure denoting God. And so, when we hear that this “landowner” does this outrageous thing of giving the same amount of money to those who work one hour as to those who work twelve hours, then we ought to look for God’s activity in the world, and in our lives.

Now, of course, God has given us life; and life has a great variety and scope. Life has a complexity and wonder to it; a simplicity also, one could say. All of that is something that God has, which God has given to us in abundance. And we can search out that mystery, that wonder, that wisdom, in which we participate by being called into life.

However, more than that, in the gospel message, is that we—thanks to God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ—we are called into communion with God; we are called into the life that God has for us, eternal life, which has an infinite quality to it.

And, therefore, the spring—one could say—of generosity, comes not only from the various things we have been given as created beings. The spring of generosity comes also because of this sharing of God, of his eternal life, with us, in Christ. Because that sharing of eternal life has this infinite quality to it, therefore, it provides a motivation whereby we deal with our finite resources, our finite abilities, and the circumstances which present themselves to us, which do not allow us to do just everything or anything, but are limiting to some degree. So, on the one hand, thanks to God's sharing of his life with us in Christ, we have this infinite spring of life that we can draw upon. Jesus mentioned (in John's gospel) that he himself was the "water of life", the "bread of life". There is a quality of that which is not limited. But we do practise it in a world where there are finite resources, where we are finite and limited.

The temptation always in life is to think that we do not have enough for ourselves. There is never enough. But, because of this spring that God has put into our lives, through faith in Christ, we know that, at one level, we have more than enough, we have an abundance of life to share with others. And we can do so with our limited means.

That's one aspect of generosity. Now, in this parable of Jesus, the "landowner" involves people who are not the original group of day-labourers. Here are people brought in at the eleventh hour, literally-speaking, to do their work, for just the one hour.

Now, what does not make sense on one level makes sense on another. Thanks to our faith in Christ, God gives us of the Spirit of God, a Spirit which is not only restricted to us personally. It's poured out into the world. It's poured out into the peoples of the world, and can manifest itself in all sorts of different ways. And, in fact, the goal of this Spirit that God pours out into the world is the kingdom of God which has no limit. It is an eternal reality, which has dawned, but which is still to come in its full depth and wonder. So, as the Spirit works in the world, there is opportunity everywhere for the kingdom's work to be done.

When it comes to the kingdom of God, we obviously should not think too narrowly about our lives and the lives of others in the great scheme of things. Therefore, we form partnerships for the sake of the kingdom. Generosity, understood in this way, can be generosity towards others and what they are doing, the good that they are contributing to in this world, and therefore towards the kingdom. Generosity requires looking beyond what is for our immediate and narrow benefit, to the wider, fuller benefit, of what God is bringing into being, through his Spirit, and through his many "workers".

To summarize so far, God shares of his life, which means that we have an abundance to share with others with our limited means. God also gives of his Spirit, giving us gifts, and inspiration, and the like, for the work of his kingdom. But we work, of course, in our situation on this earth, which calls us into partnerships with others as they also work for the benefit of this infinite quality, which is the kingdom of God.

Now, in the latter part of this parable, it's as though the "landowner" is taken aback by this complaint on the part of the worker, who couldn't see why this person, who had worked just the one hour, got the same amount of money as he did. The landowner seemed to be taken aback.

And perhaps that is something of the nature of God himself. God is not focussed on "self"; God gives of self. And, of course, God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son—

himself—in order that all who believe in him may have eternal life, may not perish, but may have eternal life.

A neighbour of ours recently came back from a holiday in North or South Carolina. They were at the beach. The management of the hotel—or whatever the accommodation was—where they were staying, said, “Shouldn’t you have checked out already?” This was on a Wednesday, and, in fact, they had booked in just for the Tuesday night and not for the Wednesday night. Here, they were enjoying their holiday so much that they forgot they were there an extra day.

The service into which we are called frequently means forgetting ourselves and doing the right thing, the appropriate thing when it is called for. Remember Jesus’ depiction of the last judgement, where the people on the right hand side, do all these various things and are then surprised when the Son of Man says to them, “Blessed are you, for you visited me, you came to me when I was sick, you fed me, you gave me drink, you welcomed me as a stranger...” Generosity is forgetting of self on behalf of others, as God has given of himself.

This whole theme of generosity is associated with God himself— God who has this eternal life to share, into which he calls us; and, therefore, we have this great spring of life to share with others, albeit with our own limited resources. God’s generosity is seen in this Spirit which he wishes to pour out on the world. That generosity allows us and others to do all sorts of good, and then for us to partner with other people, because all this work, motivated by the Spirit, is finally to benefit the kingdom, and not just ourselves. Finally, this generosity, associated with God is shown as God has given of himself—essentially, “forgotten” himself—for the sake of doing what is right, what is good, shown in Jesus’ service on our behalf. We can participate in that generosity as we no longer focus on ourselves, but forget ourselves, for the sake of doing what is right and what is good.

God, then, is the Generous One. And God calls us to be this generous people.