

“The Jazz of Generosity”
Matthew 20:1-16
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Lost to us in the mists of time is information about the teenaged and twenty-something years of Jesus. We hear about Jesus at the age of twelve loitering in the temple, and then again at the age of thirty entering his public ministry, but in between, we have nothing more to go on than knowing that he *may* have been a carpenter since many, if not most, sons in that day and age followed in the occupational footsteps of the fathers. Nevertheless, I have a theory about how Jesus spent at least some of those years. Although there is no hard evidence, I have reason to believe that in addition to his day job pounding nails as a carpenter, Jesus had a night gig, pounding out a jazz beat. Yes, I think Jesus was a jazz musician, or that he at least had jazz sensibilities. How do I know this? Well, it’s all there in the gospels, the stories of Jesus showing us that he lived and preached so many of the characteristics of Jazz music that he must have been a jazz player, or at least an aficionado. I know, I know, you are going to tell me that Jazz wasn’t even born until the twentieth century in the US, but hey, it is Jesus we are talking about here, and Jesus grants poetic license as generously as grace.

To make you believers tonight, I am going to use our parable from Matthew twenty as a case study for the Jazzy Jesus. This is a story presumably direct from the divine mind, and therefore representative of the true nature of the man. And if

there is a passage that better represents a jazz sensibility in the Bible, I don't know what it is. Before we return to the jazz aspects of it though, let's review what happened. It is a parable, a story using the local context of the agricultural labor market to say something about the divine heart, and it is a parable the reading of which I must admit makes my egalitarian instincts start to resonate, because as impractical and anti-entrepreneurial as it sounds, I'm of the belief that the dishwasher should be paid as much as the manager of the restaurant, and that the custodial staff should earn what the surgical team earns, for everyone's work is important and valuable; no one eats without clean dishes and no one goes under the knife with the blood and guts from the previous patient still on the floor. But then I have to remind myself that this passage is not about economics, or labor markets, or even grape harvesting. It's about generosity and grace. Between the lines of the story, the real issue here is whether or not the followers of Jesus are entitled to the same measure of God's grace as the Jews. Should the johnny-come-lately Gentiles share in God's grace and love, or are they out of luck since they have not been there from the beginning like the Jews, enduring captivity in Egypt, and then slogging it out in the wilderness, and surviving through the Exile, and now suffering through the Roman occupation. And even if God should grant the Gentiles *some* grace, should they really get the same amount as those there from the beginning? This was a major concern in the early Christian community and

Matthew uses this parable of Jesus to make his case. His conclusion, not surprisingly, is that God's generosity extends to all, even the Gentiles.

What makes this a proof text for a Jazzy Jesus? Well, first let's describe jazz, if we can. What are the hallmarks of jazz? Well, you've heard some of them already in the hymns we sang earlier, but the list of a few of the more identifiable characteristics of Jazz would include that jazz frequently plays a variation on a theme. It takes a melody line and runs away with it, taking it to new heights, but always returning to its starting point. Jazz isn't the only form of music that does this, but it may do it better, and more freely, than any other. Jazz frequently features call and response, with instruments answering and echoing one another. Jazz improvises. It has been said that the difference between jazz and more formal forms of music is that while the goal of formal music is to be performed exactly as it was written, and the skill of the musician is measured by one's ability to imitate the original, the idea behind jazz is that it is dynamic music, where reproduction takes a back seat to innovation and the skill of the musician is measured by one's ability to improvise. Jazz is often syncopated, displacing the beats or accents so that strong beats become weak and vice versa. Jazz jams, quickly taking on new players who bring their unique gifts to the unity of music on stage. Jazz is unpredictable; it doesn't always play by the rules. Miles Davis was famous for playing long trumpet solos with his back to the audience, something no solo violinist would ever do. But most of all, jazz is generous; it gives joy, it gives

expression to hopes and dreams, it gives permission to experiment and grow and change, it gives motion and freedom.

In one way or another, either directly or indirectly, both the parable of the workers in the vineyards, and he who told it, exhibit all these aspects of jazz. Like many of Jesus' parables, this one begins with the theme, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." and the variation on that theme brings into play a different set of characters, this time workers in a vineyard instead of a woman sweeping a house, characters and a plot which take our understanding of the Kingdom to a different place, before returning us gently to kingdom themes like the sovereignty of God and God's generosity and the most basic and persistent of the kingdom characteristics, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last," a concluding restatement of the theme of "the Kingdom of heaven is like."

In between the establishment of that theme and the story's return to it, there's a little bit of that call and response, an invitation of sorts, seen in the calling of new workers every few hours. The call -- the invitation -- is to grace, to receive the divine favor, and the response is an enthusiastic one: Sure, we'll work! It's call and response in a positive key, with the saxophone answering at nine o'clock, and the stand up bass at noon, the Hammond B-3 organ at three o'clock, and the drum kit at five. But come quittin' time, the response to the call to collect the paychecks changes to a minor key, to complaint, to grudge, to envy. The call to grace is the same one we receive today. Sometimes we respond affirmatively, and other times

not so much. We are invited to take part in the great harvest, and we respond with our lives, or we grumble.

Jazz improvises and so does Jesus. When there weren't enough workers, the landowner called in more. When the Jews didn't respond, God improvised by calling the gentiles. When people don't get the idea of the kingdom from watching Jesus in action, he improvises with a parable. Parable after parable is Jesus improvising, using his creativity to share the message in ways his listeners can connect with. He's improvising on the commandments. He's improvising on the tradition. He's improvising on the images used to represent God and the Kingdom. But for all that improvising, like good jazz, he always stays on key. He knows the message so well that he's able to tell it in a thousand ways and doesn't need the printed notes to proclaim it. The Pharisees and the Scribes and all the others who constantly challenged Jesus played the tune as it had always been written. Improvisation to them was a sin. But not for Jesus, for whom the tune is both as solid and flexible as the Holy Spirit itself.

One of the features of jazz I appreciate the most is syncopation, the moving of the beat to an unexpected place, a changing of the rhythm that puts the emphasis in a new place. Instead of the first and third beats, a syncopated rhythm emphasizes the second and fourth. Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard changes the beat in the ears of those listening to the story. They are waiting for the downbeat on one, the expected affirmation that just is just and that those who worked from

the beginning are the deserving ones. But the syncopation reveals something different about the tune when different things are emphasized. The equal pay rates for unequal work shift the story to a new place. The last will be first and the first will be last is the syncopated beat of the Kingdom. God does the unexpected even if it starts off sounding a little strange to our ears.

Jazz is generous. It gives and gives. It demands something from those who would play it, but for them, as well as we who listen, there are abundant gifts, most especially joy. There is a joy in jazz that even slow jazz tunes can't hide. Other kinds of music bring joy, to be sure, but none quite so regularly. We're not talking about the Blues, but jazz, a language of joy for worship. And so it is with the jazz of generosity that I want to conclude tonight. The laborers in the vineyard could not grasp the generous landowner. Some apparently believed they were worth more than the others. Maybe some believed they were worth less than what God wanted to give them, and expected they would receive less. In any case, what all of them missed was the joy of the landowner's gift to everyone. With envy, all they could do was complain about what others had received, instead of rejoicing that all *had* received abundantly. They evaluated what they had received not in light of the owner's gift, but of what they thought they should receive compared to those around them. It may be a natural human tendency to do so, but that doesn't make it right. They missed the jazz of generosity, the joy of a giving heart. They went to a jazz concert, but they went with cotton balls in their ears.

So here is what I want you to remember about Jazzy Jesus, that in him is life and life abundant. Through him, God expressed a generosity of spirit and grace unparalleled in human or divine history. In his way of being, his jazzy way of being, he demonstrated that generosity in the midst of a climate of scarcity. He blew his horn of hope, he tickled his ivories of invitation, he pounded out the beat of justice, all expressions of the generous divine heart. He welcomed those whom we did not, those we rejected because our perspectives on God were too narrow. Jesus jammed with sinners and Samaritans, with Gentiles and ungenerous hearts, all to reveal the abundance of God's imagination and love for all creation, us included. And what did we do? We strung him up with our stinginess, our hearts filled with a mentality of scarcity. We labored in the vineyard, some longer than others, but we labored, and come payday, all we could do was begrudge God the generosity that brought Jesus among us in the first place. And you know what happened next.

The legendary trumpeter Miles Davis once said, "When you hit a wrong note, it's the next note you hit that makes it good or bad." The grace of Jesus Christ makes that possible in our lives, for we are not condemned for our stinginess, but invited to transform it. I was a stingy person once upon a time. At the age when Jesus was loitering in the temple learning about God's generosity, I was in my bedroom ironing the dollar bills I collected delivering newspapers to restore them to their rightful condition, not so that when I gave them away people wouldn't

have to unwrinkled them, but so that they would honor the very fine pockets which carried them. I hit a wrong note at the age of twelve, and it took me several years of consecutive wrong notes before I got my giving in the right key. And while today, maybe it is not for me to judge whether I am generous, at least I can say I am more generous than I was, and I'm trying to play new variations on that theme. Thank God that "When you hit a wrong note, it's the next note you hit that makes it good or bad." We can hope that it is a lesson the laborers in the vineyard learned after the landowner reminded them that "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?"

As you have been reminded several times, next Sunday will be our opportunity to reflect on our generous God and our response to the generosity shown to us and to all in the vineyard that day. In the week to come, I invite you to prayerfully consider the next note you will play, the one you will play when the time comes for you and your family to consider how much to give to God's mission through our church, and then to bring forward your Estimate of Giving card. As you prayerfully decide what your pledge will be, I encourage you not to do so by trying to figure out how many programs you will benefit from, or how much the person in the pew next to you ought to be giving, or how many children some other family has and therefore how much more they ought to give, or how long or how often or how much you have given to this church in the past, or

whether you agree fully with the way the budget is spent, or by any other standard that may have you, like the laborers in the vineyard, looking to your right or to your left to measure your gift in terms of someone else's.

Instead, as you walk daily in your faith, as well as when you fill out your Estimate of Giving card, let the generosity of God be your guide, remembering that generosity is like jazz, bringing joy wherever it is played, bringing in new players to jam together, improvising in ways that reach new audiences, syncopating the way the world is run, so that truly, the last will be first, and the first last on earth as it is in heaven. May the music we make with our generosity be a joyful noise unto the Lord, and an invitation to the whole world to join in that joy. Amen.