

Oct. 21, 2018  
Matthew 20:1-16  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Fruit of the Spirit: Generosity***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

We are in the midst of our *Fruit of the Spirit* series, looking at the characteristics that we hope to find in ourselves when we tune our spirits to God's Spirit. This metaphor of fruit of the Spirit comes from the letter to the Galatians, where there are nine characteristics listed. We have already considered love, kindness, self-control, joy, peace, and patience. Today's theme is generosity.

I've chosen a parable – the Laborers in the Vineyard from the gospel of Matthew – to help us reflect on this fruit of the Spirit.

One of the words we will hear in this story is translated as *idle* in English, but in the Greek it simply means *un-active*. We might be tempted to hear Puritanical overtones when we hear the word *idle* – such as, idle hands are the devil's workshop. However, that is not what the text says, it simply says the people are not moving.

In this parable we will confront our tendency to think people should only get what they have “earned.” However, do we always want to get what we deserve? Both good and bad? Is it possible to be grateful when someone is generous toward us? Is it possible to be grateful when someone is generous toward others?

### SERMON

Why didn't those hired last have work? Because no one had hired them. Maybe they had been moving around all day looking for work. These were day laborers, not people with steady jobs. We need to be careful about our tendency to blame the unemployed rather than to confront the systemic realities that make it hard to find work. Those who had the opportunity to work all day and those who only got to work for an hour had similar needs. Their families were hungry. The landowner generously helped them all to survive.

So, why this story at this point in Matthew's gospel? Most of the time we don't pay attention to the surrounding material, but today we should. Just before this parable Matthew tells the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man who asks what he must do to have eternal life. Now, here is a person who cares about life in the Spirit.

Jesus first reminds him to keep the commandments, which the young man assures Jesus that he already does. He's been doing the right thing. In the face of the young man's firm self assurance about his own moral certitude, we can imagine Jesus' eyes narrowing as he looks the young man over.

Jesus ups the ante – significantly. Jesus challenges the young man,

*sell your possessions,  
give the money to the poor,  
and you will have treasure in heaven;  
then come, follow me.*

When the young man heard this, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. And his possessions had him. He couldn't follow Jesus' wisdom. He was used to following the rules; but this kind of generosity of spirit was beyond him. Jesus let him go.

Both of these stories are about money and how we use it and mis-use it. Matthew holds the two characters before us: the possession-loving rich young man and the surprisingly generous landowner. The implicit question is who will we be?

Do we value extravagant unearned generosity or is our commitment to a quid pro quo society? How often do we hear - People only deserve what they earn. Every woman for herself. Whoever has the most toys wins. Multi billion dollar deals are more important than justice for people. We can sense the narrowing of Jesus' eyes as he looks us over.

Today is Stewardship Sunday and I thank you for your generosity to the church through your time, talents and treasures. Money is mission and the money we share through First Parish makes our ministries possible. You should have received a letter this week asking you to make a commitment for 2019.

On the congregational side, this commitment is so that church leaders can make important decisions about the coming year. On the personal side, it is a spiritual

commitment of generosity. It sets an intention. In my experience the more we are intentionally generous, the more we grow in generosity of spirit.

We give thanks that you also are generous with many other organizations and causes nearby and around the world. You make a difference. The question for today is do your commitments for financial generosity reflect the way your spirit is tuned to God's Spirit? Do you need tuning?

We are called to be stewards of the gift of life God has given us. It's that simple and that incredibly challenging. We have not earned life. It is a generous gift.

As we all know, but seldom acknowledge, it is our gift for only a time. As poet Mary Oliver asks, *What will you do with your one wild and precious life?* Will we hold tight to it and our many possessions and grieve? Or will we share generously with those who need what we have to share? Will our lives be a burden or a blessing to life itself?