

Attitude of Gratitude

One of the jobs I had while working through my way through undergrad school was to work for Sears and Roebuck; and, I worked there for, I don't know, probably three or four months. Then I decided that I was going to leave school, marry my love, and raise a family. Later after we had moved around a bit and the kids were in school, I decided to go back to work just part time mainly just to get out of the house a little bit and meet some people because we were new in Mississippi. So I went back to what I knew and I applied at the Sears store. I was hired. Only this time, instead of just saying hi I'm Susie, my little name tag said "associate" and then my name.

It seems when Walmart started up they started a new phenomenon of calling people who work for them "associates" instead of employees. And then, Kinko's came along and they called their employees "coworkers."

There was a commercial on television that I just happened to catch while I was watching the news this morning: This CEO/executive who gathered together all of his underlings excuse me, it's Kinko's FedEx, so he's gathered together his coworkers in the shower. Someone says "why are we in the shower?" The CEO says "well good thoughts and new ideas always come to me in the shower; so, I figured we'd just gather here." About that time one of the coworkers comes up with this brilliant idea and the CEO said, "see it works!" They all laugh and they go out of the shower together getting strange looks from those around.

Somehow I don't think it really works this way in the real world. When we have coworkers and associates, everyone's supposed to be treated equally, we're supposed to share in the work, and share in the profit. But, all of us who've been to Walmart or Kinko's know that, if you stand and observe, there are some coworkers and associates who work a little bit harder than some of the others. Sometimes some people don't seem to be pulling their weight at all. They seem to be holding up the shelves. Yet they're supposedly paid on the same scale. In these days of homicide, suicide, bombers, global warming, bioterrorism, and whole communities getting wiped out by hurricanes, we might want to rethink our position. Take a chill pill and be grateful that we have a job rather than complaining that the other person's getting paid more than we are. But as you can tell from our scripture today, this is not a new phenomenon. Jesus 's Kingdom of heaven has one upped Walmart and Kinko's. Jesus already had the workers as associates. In Jesus 's idea of the Kingdom of Heaven, the landowner goes out throughout the day: early at sunrise and then probably about every three hours after that and hires workers throughout the day. Everyone was going to be paid the same at the end of the day, When that happened, those who were hired in the morning started to grumble a little bit and the owner asks, "don't I have the right to do what I want to do with my own money." (The cynical side of me says there are some people today who say "no". They try to make us jump through red tape and hoops but that's another sermon.)

The history of this is that the grapes come in all at once and they must be gathered before the rainy season hits. So people who don't have shops and farms of their own would go down to the marketplace and wait to be hired. Now it's it's only common sense that the land owner is gonna hire the best workers first because he knows they're gonna be steady and they're gonna work vigorously to get his crop in. But, as the day progresses and he sees there's still so much harvest left, he goes and hires more. Finally he's resolved to hiring the least desirable ones-the ones that have been standing there all day because no one wants to hire them. But the owner of heaven is a gracious God who knows that some have more energy, knowledge, wherewithal to get a job done, and to go for the

long haul. Just like this landowner did, God knows that the harvest is plentiful. God knows that all workers have value and the harvest needs all of the workers. If the landowner had not gone back and gotten those last few workers, the crop might not have gotten in. Most importantly, God knows and loves all of the workers!

So what is our reaction to this parable? We've all heard it a million times if we've been in church. I think that we would tend to complain like the ones that were hired first. When we look around and we see somebody getting a reward and we don't think they've worked quite up to our standard, it's so tempting to just kind of complain about that. And yet, in the same breath, we live in a country where we claim we want to have justice and equality for all. It's kind of a paradox because, if you look at our system, we have set up a system where the ratio of a CEO's pay to a blue collar workers pay is 531 to 1. We've set up a system where Tiger Woods gets more money to put his picture on the front of a Wheaties box than the farmer got for the crop that made the Wheaties that went inside the box. We've set up a system where a third grade teacher is lucky if he or she gets \$30,000 a year. We've set up a system where our most precious ones- our little children-are entrusted to daycare workers, the lowest paid workers in our society and lots of times the least educated. We want people to earn their rewards like the Smith Barney ad used to say.

Even in our churches, we question the idea of this last minute conversion could it really be as valid as those wonder children that accept Christ at age 2 or those of us who have studied and seriously considered whether we would accept Christ and have been fully mature when we've made that decision. Also, can these people on their deathbeds who have been totally out of whack by our standards suddenly become just as saved as we are? There's just something about that – it just kind of grates on us a little bit and we think maybe we ought to earn our way into heaven.

Well, I for one am glad we don't have to I don't know that I would make it and I don't know many other people who would make it because we are human beings and we fall short of the glory of God! I like to think of our heavenly father not just as a landowner but as a father,

When our children are born, lots of times they will try to earn our affection, Hopefully we're good parents and we love them anyway. We love them equally- each child has their own attributes and their own skills and their own desires and their own talents and, if you nurture that, each one will grow into the special individual that God created them to be. We don't value them because they can sing or they can type or they can build a lawn mower motor or they can grow a crop or they can help us cut the grass. We don't value our children for that. We value our children because they're ours! That's why when they bring us a little picture that they've drawn and then they say "happy birthday, mom!", it means more to us than the \$100 present someone else gave us, They are our children. We look at them and see a little piece of us. And, we want them to succeed! Well, thank God, this is the way God looks at us! We receive God's grace because we are God's children. God loves us because we are God's children. God created us in God's image. God wants us to succeed. and God tries to give us every advantage. Sometimes though, we kind of mess up we-don't listen to daddy, we tell him we know what way is best, and we try to do it on our own. Thank God because he's always giving us a second chance, and he's always helping us stand up when we fall down. Then there are those who say "how could God pay this and not that"? They question God's ways.

Now I'm not one of those that says you should never question God. I think as human beings we were given a brain and we have a natural curiosity and a natural cynicism sometimes. And those who talk about the patience of Job should read the book of Job. He may have been patient, but he talked to

God all the way through and shook his fist a few times. So, I think God expects us to question sometimes. But when we get right down to it, we realize that God's ways are not our ways and that's what God tells Job – “who are you to tell me how to run the universe? Did you make it so?” Sometimes, when we don't understand, it's again like a parent with a child, I remember when my parents did certain things I would say “why are they so mean?” “why aren't they doing it this way?” “why won't they let me do that?” and then, all of a sudden, 20 years later I have my own little ones running around and I hear this thing coming out of my mouth and I say to myself. “oh that's why she said that” because it just clicks. God's gonna do what's best for us and sometimes it's hard to understand. As Scripture says: God reigns on the good and the bad alike; God allows the sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous; God loves all of God's creation; and one day, when we get to heaven, we'll see that clearly and we'll understand.

But now, it's up to us to show God's love to other folks. So we need to apply God's ways to our own lives, to our own church. We need to recognize that every person has value. We need to look around our members and recognize their gifts and their talents and encourage them. And listen to the voice of all members from the youngest to the oldest from the richest to the poorest from the righteous to the . . .well I'm not quite there yet. We are all in one vineyard together and some of us may have more vigor than others. Some may appear to work more efficiently than others. Some may even appear to be sleeping on the job; but, God knows why they are here and God knows that their talents can be used. It's not up to us to judge how good a job they're doing.

I ran across a saying that really hit me -it says “no one can help everybody but everybody can help someone” We need to, as Paul says, live to be worthy of the gospel of Christ. If we do everything that we do as if we were doing it for Christ, how would our work change? I remember grumbling when I first moved to Indiana and I was a stay at home mom about how housework-it never ends. You know, you clean one room and, by the time you get to the next one, the the kids have messed up the first one again. My neighbor quoted this to me “do everything as if it is to Christ” and I thought to myself, “what would I be doing if I thought Jesus was going to show up for dinner tonight?” It really did change my attitude for quite a while. But, like most humans, I need to post it up somewhere. I keep forgetting. What about if we saw everything done on our behalf as a gift from God -how would our perspective change?

There's an answering machine at Pacific Palisades high school in California. It starts off: hello you've reached the automated answering service of your school. In order to assist you in connecting with the right staff, please listen to all your options before making your selection.

- 1 to lie about why your child is absent press one
- 2 to make excuses for why your child did not do his work press 2
- 3 to complain about what we do press 3
- 4 to swear at staff members press 4
- 5 to ask why you didn't get information that was already enclosed in your newsletter and several Flyers mailed to you press 5
- 6 well it goes on all the way up to 10 and, then, at the very end, it says:

if you realize that this is the real world and you want your child to be taught to be accountable and responsible for his or her own behavior, class work, and homework, and you applaud our efforts to make that happen. hang up and have a nice day.

As we begin to think about ourselves as stewards of God's gifts to us, let us think about what it means to be good stewards. Let us begin with ourselves instead of complaining to God, the session, the preacher, the other members about what is wrong with the church. Let's ask what we can do to make it better-even if it's writing a letter to our Congress person about something that bothers us, or writing a letter to a sick friend, or joining a committee in the Presbyterian level and helping make the rules - picking up the phone and calling someone who's been shut in. Talk for just a few minutes, it doesn't have to be long. Send cards or offer to babysit so that some of our young folks can have some time quality time together. Maybe offer to go stay with some of these folks that have been requiring care a lot so that their caretakers can have some time out. There's all sorts of ways to reach out with God's love. Most people give when there is a specific need; but, as Presbyterians, we believe that everything we have- everything- is a gift from God. We need to give out of response and gratitude to those gifts. God wants us to live abundantly. I don't believe that if you go out and do something nice for somebody, God's gonna drop \$100 in your mailbox. I just don't believe that but I do believe that when we give out of our hearts when we give out of our gratitude rather than just out of our abundance, that somehow God makes that OK. It's a spiritual thing I cannot explain to you how it happens to you, it just does. So we need to be aware, we need to remember, we need to look around us and see how gracious our God has been to us, we need to give thanks every day in every way that we can and, with an attitude of gratitude, let us give God the glory for all of our life! Amen.

Let us pray: (Wait 5 count)

Eternal Spirit, you flow through the ages from the pages of Scripture, transforming hearts with your challenge, moving those who hear to new acts of faith, courage and mission. Bless our hearts and minds in the reading of the Word, so that we might know your presence and power more fully. We pray in the name of the Living Word. Amen.

Our **Old Testament Reading** comes from the Book of **Exodus**, Chapter **16**: verses **2–15**, found in the Pew Bible on page **112** if you would like to follow along. (Pause 10 count)

- 2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.
- 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."
- 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.
- 5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."
- 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt,
- 7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?"
- 8 Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."
- 9 Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'"
- 10 While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.
- 11 The LORD said to Moses,
- 12 "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'"
- 13 That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp

- 14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.
- 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat."

Our **second reading** comes from Paul's letter to the **Philippians**, chapter 1: verses 21–30, found in the Pew Bible on pages 1826-27 (Pause 10 count)

- 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.
- 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!
- 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.
- 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,
- 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.
- 27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved-- and that by God.
- 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,
- 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

- 1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.
- 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.
- 3 "About the third hour 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 the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.
- 6 About the eleventh hour 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 the eleventh hour 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 men 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, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?'
- 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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."