

Proper 20 – Year A
September 24
Elk Rapids, MI
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SCRIPTURE FOR THE DAY

Exodus 16:2-15 Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30 Matthew 20:1-16

I am a pretty avid golfer. I play on a golf league that I began last year and have appreciated, not only the game, but the friends I have met along the way. But, like any community—we have issues. One of the issues that we have been dealing with (or not dealing with) is a woman that is very difficult with which to accompany on the course. She complains about everyone else. She is unhappy with the speed of play. She keeps a running list of insults and hurts that she has received. She is very sharp with her criticism when a mistake is made by another and, yet, fails to count all of her strokes and often gives more strokes to others than deserved. She is terribly resentful if anyone receives a compliment, award or gift complaining that they don't deserve it. Yet, no one confronts her about her behavior because, we say, it is our fear of the barrage of rage and anger that will surely come our way. Yet, I think the reason we don't confront her is because we know, at the heart of it, she is a very fragile and unhappy person. I often wonder, what happened (or didn't happen) in her life that made her so resentful of others.

We have all known people like this throughout our journey. We have names for them, names like: old curmudgeon, glass half empty people, bitter, resentful—and the list goes on. We mostly excuse their behavior because confronting it would, probably, not make that much difference. You can imagine the reaction that Jesus received when he told his parable about the workers in the field that received the same amount of pay at the end of the day—regardless of how hard they had worked. Especially those of us who feel as though we work hard to support ourselves and our family might feel as though everyone should work for what they are given in life. I can just hear the crowd saying—it just isn't right, it's not fair and not just. But, of course, the parable points to fact that all that have is a gift from the God and the idea that we have earned all that we have received is and delusion with which we comfort ourselves.

Many years ago I read a book by Henri Nouwen entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It was one of those things in life that helped me to see gratitude as a spiritual discipline. It's easy in life to see all that is wrong, unfair and dark. There is a lot of that to see—no matter who we are or how successful we have become. Yet, how we respond to events and others in our life is always a choice of ours. Nouwen writes: Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint.

I have found it impossible to talk someone out of their negative and bitter resentment because it is their choice as to how they have chosen to respond to life; to God and to the gifts God has given to them. Nouwen quote an Estonian proverb: (that person) who does not thank for little will not thank for much." Acts of gratitude make one grateful because, step by step, they reveal that all is grace. All is grace.

There are people that have chosen to be so miserable that not even God can please them. We try everything we can to help them out. No one invites them to dinner—then—when someone does invite them to dinner they complain that the dinner was something that upset their stomach. We all know this type and person, because we are all tempted—at some time—to be that person ourselves. Until that person chooses to make another choice—nothing, ever, will please them. It is our choice and it begins by small choices between an attitude of thankfulness to God for all that we have been given and to abandon the feeling of resentment that we don't have as much as others—less deserving. It takes a constant reminding of ourselves that we have chosen another way, another response to the darkness that sits on the edge of every little thing in our life. The woman in our golf league is shared between all of us. We have given up trying to point another view, everyone is kind and caring, but not indulgent. When she begins her list of hurts, her complaint about the game or the people—we change the subject to something more meaningful and fun. We know that she will never be pleased—until she decides she has had enough of herself and that her resentment doesn't get her what she really wants.

It is a spiritual journey toward the light—toward trust and a grateful heart. It is a leaning towards the light and a realization that we have all received our more than our share of grace.

To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, Says Henri Nouwen. but to be grateful for all of our lives---the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections---that requires hard spiritual work. Still, we are only truly grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for. Let's not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God.