

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 28, 2022

PROVERBS 25:6-7 | PSALM 112 | HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16 | LUKE 14:1, 7-14

A few years ago, we were reviewing a batch of endowment applications in some committee when someone asked a very pointed question. Sure, the groups that had applied were doing important work. They were feeding the hungry, welcoming refugees, aiding the sick, running summer camps for kids. *That's fine and good*, they said. *But what's in it for us? What are we getting out of it?*

It's a question few of us have the nerve to ask out loud, but it's one many of us have in the back of our minds. *What's in this for me? What am I getting out of it?*

So often, we think of generosity primarily through the lens of reciprocity. We give something, and we get something. If you're a high school kid who volunteers at a soup kitchen, you get a reference to use on your college application. If you donate to a non-profit, you expect a letter helping you get a tax deduction. If you help your neighbor move into their new place, you expect they'll invite you over to use their pool. When we extend a helping hand to our neighbors, we leave our hand out expecting a little something in return. We'll help, but we also want to know *What's in it for me?*

That question is at the heart of today's gospel reading. Jesus is talking to a group of Pharisees, religious leaders, who are held in high esteem within their community. These men like hosting big meals where they fight over who gets the best seats and the choice food. They appear generous at first glance. Look at how many people they invited. Look at how much food they bought. But Jesus says that what appears to be generosity is really just reciprocity. These men are puffing themselves up showing off how generous they are, when all they are really just passing hosting duties around their circle of friends. It really isn't generous. It's just another way of splitting the check.

Jesus takes that model of generosity and flips it on its head. "When you give a banquet," he says, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." What this seemingly random group of people has in common is that at the time Jesus was alive they were dependent on the generosity of others. They are not going to reciprocate. If you invite them to a banquet this weekend, you are not going to get invited to their banquet next weekend. They are not going to help you get a promotion at work or get your kid into a better school. When you invite them to the table, that's all you're doing.

So let's go back to our original question, *What's in it for me?* From our perspective, our way of thinking about generosity as reciprocity, the answer is probably nothing. In fact, not only are these people not going to invite you to their place next weekend as an exalted benefactor, but they're probably going to ask when they can come back to your place. Which might turn out to be a problem. Because if the only way we can imagine being generous is by having our giving reciprocated, we're probably not going to be generous at all.

But Jesus gives us a different perspective. Not a reciprocity perspective but a resurrection perspective. Jesus says that when we give to those we believe cannot repay us, we are participating in the new life of the resurrection. That what seems like a dead end to these Pharisees is actually the beginning of the kingdom of God. That all of our efforts and service and time and witness are taken into the heart of God where nothing is in vain.

In N.T. Wright's book *Surprised by Hope*, he sums it up this way. "What you do in the present -- by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells,

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campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself -- will last into God's future."¹

So when we're generous with those we believe cannot repay us, we are trusting that God uses our gifts and talents and efforts in unexpected ways. When we can take a risk on our neighbor, when we can give without knowing exactly how it's going to turn out, we're trusting that, since one day God will set everything right, our generosity, our service, and our lives themselves are never in vain. They last into God's future.

The author of Hebrews makes the same point with a vivid image. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." In other words, you never know the full impact, the full worth of what you're doing. And we won't really know until we reside in God's new creation. So instead of orienting our life and service around who can pay us back, we orient our lives toward the kingdom of God.

That resurrection perspective doesn't just change how we see our own giving and service. But it changes how we see other people, too. If all we think about is reciprocity, then those kids at the synod's summer camps in Bosnia have nothing to offer you. Families who receive assistance from the Love Fund gave nothing to offer you. Guests at St. Matthew Trinity have nothing to offer you. Kids at Epitome of Soul have nothing to offer you. Patients at BVMI have nothing to offer you. If they weren't here, it wouldn't really change anything in your life. Your life would be basically the same.

But from a resurrection perspective, all those relationships change. There is no one we encounter who does not have something to offer us. Because the light of the risen Christ shines on each of us, everyone we encounter has something to teach us about the love of God. From a resurrection point of view, there is no such thing as a person with nothing to offer us. Because everyone is a conduit for God's love overflowing into our world. Every single person in this world is someone who is integral to the kingdom of God. Their lives last into God's future.

There's a little picture outside the church office of Dorothy Day sitting next to this man in one of her worker homes. And it reminds me of this story that I've probably told before, but it's a good one, so here it is again.² There was this guy who lived in one of Day's homes who was just the worst. He was rude. He was mean. He didn't pitch in like everybody else. And people started coming up to Day and asking, "Can we just get rid of this guy? He gets on everyone's nerves. He's not pulling his weight, and everybody in the house would be a lot better if he was gone." And Day said, "No. Can't kick him out." And people kept complaining, "Come on. He's got nothing to offer. Doesn't do any good. Why can't we just kick him out?" And Day replied, "Well, because he's Jesus."

What's in it for me? Probably nothing. Nothing except entertaining angels without knowing it. Nothing except the hope of the resurrection. Nothing except for the presence of Christ. Nothing except the kingdom of God.

What's in it for me? In some ways, nothing. And yet, everything.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (Zondervan, 2008), 193.

² Paraphrased from John Loughery and Blythe Randolph, *Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century* (Simon and Schuster, 2021).