
Theological Philanthropy

Matthew 20:1-16

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 21, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

The ALS ice bucket challenge, one in which a person has a bucket of ice water dumped on his/her head to raise awareness about this disease as well as encourage donations for ALS research, went viral this summer despite criticisms of this fundraising approach. Some said it was a form of self-congratulations; others said more focus was on the stunt than on donating money to the charity. Some argued that this method was trivial compared to more genuine involvement in charity organizations; others railed against it because of health risks and the misuse of water. A writer in *The Daily Telegraph* called the challenge "a middle-class wet T-shirt contest for armchair clicktivists" (Willard Foxton).

But from all signs, this challenge appeared to be successful and that may even be an understatement. As of yesterday, more than \$114 million has been raised for the ALS Association. This social-media saturated challenge caught on like wildfire with Hollywood celebrities, politicians, academicians, athletes, church leaders, families, and friends. It even crossed my mind at one point to nominate President Brodhead to enter this wintry endeavor but then I decided that I wanted to keep my job!

The amount of money raised is impressive and there's a heightened awareness of this disease but what really intrigued me was how this ice bucket challenge created a culture of giving and even a sense of philanthropic joy. We saw the conjoining of play with philanthropy. People had fun on the path toward financial giving. The *telos*, the end goal, of this chilly water bucket was to give.

The New York Times sought the 'why of giving' at the end of last year and found that people give for a variety of reasons: an internal moral prompting; recognition or prestige; social pressure; or, internal satisfaction otherwise known as the "warm glow." In an university setting that promotes civic engagement, there can always be the temptation toward résumé building or a "résumé race" among students—padding one's CV with community service or 'doing good in the neighborhood' opportunities. There's nothing wrong with doing good but do we do good, do we give, in order to get something in return? Is our giving in any way self-interested? Some might say there's no such thing as 'pure altruism,' that there's always something attached to our giving.

In a free market society that promotes free exchanges of selling and buying goods, giving and receiving, maybe nothing is ever really free. A former athlete says he "was freer when he didn't have a cent" (Mike Tyson). Maybe the capitalistic cycle causes us to always expect something in return for our work, for our giving. Giving to gain. Always working for something and never for nothing. Is it that we've been formed in a moral economy that promotes hard individualistic work, economic individualism and ingenuity through production, distribution and exchange, as means to a payday? We hear "your work will pay off." We hear, "an honest day's wage for an honest day's work." I'm not suggesting that we don't get paid for our work but I'm raising the question of our motivation for the giving of ourselves through work. Why do we work? Why do we give?

When a worker yells out, "Thank God It's Friday!" what does this suggest? Perhaps they could just be tired from the week or have great plans for the weekend. However, it may also implicitly suggest that they do not find meaning in their work and only see it as a means to a paycheck. Giving to gain. Work can become a deadening daily practice that saps the soul of joy if our labor is only a commodity, something to be sold to an employer in exchange for money, rather than work as participation in the ongoing creative activity of God.

We may always be working for something with the belief that it will pay off in the end. When wedded to work, we may think that there will be a glorious reception in the end, some sort of profit. In 1904, German sociologist Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In it, he focused his attention on how religious ideas of groups, such as the Calvinists, influenced the emergence of the modern capitalistic spirit. The implications of Calvinist thought, according to Weber, led to the idea that successful production in one's work was a sign of one's preordained eternal status. Profit and material success were positive signs of God's favor and one's eternal destiny, thus one should be diligent and obedient in one's worldly calling. Weber says, "the attainment of [wealth] as a fruit of labour in a calling was a sign of God's blessing." Therefore, in this perspective, individual work and its financial profit are tied to one's eternal salvation. Not only does this suggest how those living in poverty may be viewed but it indicates why some live to work rather than work to live.

The Protestant work ethic may have warped our Christian imaginations and sapped the life out of us. We know people like the protagonist, Gustav von Ashenbach, in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, who in many ways embodies the Protestant work ethic. At one point, an observer in the story said this about Ashenbach: "'You see, [he] has always lived like this,' and the speaker contracted the fingers of his left hand into a fist; 'never like this,' and let his open hand droop comfortably from the arm of his chair." Ashenbach worked as if his life depended upon it and he worked hard despite the odds. He worked himself to death. This was literally the case, as his failure to produce new works leads to his eventual death. His life was dictated by work. Living to work killed him because his work was his life and there was no other source of life. It was the incessant drive to work to gain something; it was the worship of work.

The distorted understanding of work that makes it inseparable from the achievement of wealth and salvation or blessing actually makes capitalism a god by linking an ethic of prosperity to a particular level of sanctified religiosity. Thus, the more prosperous one is the more spiritual or blessed by God one is considered to be. This kind of theology is created at the altar of economics in the golden sanctuary of a gospel of accumulation and wealth. This conception is only good when the sun is shining brightly on us because it can't handle thunderstorms or tornados that blow in our lives; it can't handle unemployment or underemployment or financial struggle.

But, this isn't what Jesus teaches anyway. When the rich young man asks Jesus, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Not only does Jesus tell him that only God is good; he urges him to sell his possessions and give to the poor and the rich man is not a happy camper. Jesus even says, it's "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." By his responses, Jesus is saying that you can't buy your way into the kingdom, that your economic status is not the barometer of your salvation, that one can't earn paradise by bribing God with tickets to the Duke Men's basketball game in Cameron Stadium (God wouldn't route for a devil anyway!). Salvation is an impossibility through human activity because it is the gift of God (Ephes 2). Hearing this, the disciples ask, "Then who can be saved? And Jesus responds, "for mortals it's impossible but for God all things are possible." Salvation is about God's agency, what God does for God's purposes.

Even if you are a doing-good disciple, there can be problems. You've probably heard the story about a "pastor and a taxi driver [who] both died and went to heaven. St. Peter was at the Pearly gates waiting for them. 'Come with me', said St. Peter to the taxi driver. The taxi driver did as he was told and followed St. Peter to a mansion. It had anything you could imagine from a bowling alley to an olympic size pool. 'Wow, thank you', said the taxi driver. Next, St. Peter led the pastor to a rugged old shack with a bunk bed and a little old television set. 'Wait, I think you are a little mixed up', said the pastor. 'Shouldn't I be the one who gets the mansion? After all I was a pastor, went to church every day, and preached God's word.' 'Yes, that's true. But during your sermons people slept. When the taxi driver drove, everyone prayed.'"

Salvation is not linked to your work but this doesn't mean we are not to work and become Christian couch potatoes with our feet on a coffee table watching Jesus on the 60" big screen HDTV doing all the work, even recording it on the DVR so that we can watch Jesus doing work all the time as a way to excuse ourselves from working. There's so much work to do for the kingdom and in our gospel lesson, the landowner even asks those standing around in the marketplace, "Why are you just standing around?" The landowner himself actively seeks workers early in the morning so work by itself is not bad. But when we use work as a badge of our faith or a magical means for gaining good virtues and spiritual outcomes, it's problematic. The landowner pays the same amount to every worker regardless of how much work they did and when some workers grumble, he responds, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?"

Jesus presents an economy of generosity such that one's work does not earn membership into God's kingdom nor does work, the amount or type, determine your worth. It's so easy to forget this in this furiously frenetic, frantic, and frenzied educational setting. This generous divine logic flies in the face of the logic of the Protestant work ethic because work doesn't equal salvation nor does it indicate one's spiritual height, depth, or maturity. Your work ethic is not salvific. It can't save you. Hard work may get you a good grade in a public policy course but it will not alter God's love for you because your worth to God is not determined by your work or virtues or lack thereof. We can't work our way to status, acceptance, and belonging through social groups or fraternities or sports teams. Remember what Paul Tillich said, "you are accepted" already by God, loved by God more than you even imagine and this isn't merit-based. Your spiritual destiny is not linked to your economy but God's generosity and ecology of grace. Blessings don't indicate that you are chosen. God's love does, and God so loved the world. This undercuts the whole notion that salvation is wrapped up in us when it is totally, wholly, dependent on God and God's grace. "Are you resentful because I'm generous?" Literally, "Is your eye evil because I'm good?"

This passage is about the priority of God's action, not ours. It's a distinct economy rooted in the beneficence of God, one in which there's the recognition that everything ultimately comes from God, not from our brawn or strategies or birthright, or social status. God's generous posture levels the human plane to erase a hierarchy among humanity even in the face of evil, that evil eye. This free economy of grace might be called 'theological philanthropy.' It's the way God loves people.

We're here because someone gave. We're here because someone loved without our asking. Olivia in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* says: "Love sought is good, but given unsought is better" (Act 3, Scene 1, 147). The Dukes gave so generously and for some of them, according to retired Duke University archivist, Bill King, their "considerable contributions came in a quiet way" (re: BN Duke). Quiet because not every gift was made known in public and not every gift was even known. But there was a spirit of generosity as high and wide as this "great towering church" (James B. Duke) at the center of campus.

This church building speaks of God too. As the spiritual says:

My God is so high

You can't get over Him;

So wide -

You can't get around Him;

So low -

You can't get under Him..

The immensity and beauty of God's generous spirit towers over us yet touches us right where and when we need it, giving us more than we need and more than we deserve and more than we expect. The workers hired later in the day would expect less than a full day's wage but God doesn't meet our expectations; God transcends them and goes beyond what we think or imagine. Those who are entitled to a lower wage, receive more than they deserve! Getting what you deserve is justice but more than justice is generosity. God is more than just; God is generous because God is love. And though philosopher Cornel West may say, "justice is what love looks like in public," love exceeds justice, though it includes it, because love is a surplus of amazing grace and grace looks beyond our faults and sees our need.

This is the church's one foundation. This is the chapel's one foundation. A generosity rooted in a Trinity of love, one in which fathers welcome lost sons home; one in which kings welcome guests from the streets to a wedding banquet; one in which we can discover like the poet after saying a prayer, "I got nothing that I asked for—but got everything I had hoped for" (Anonymous soldier). In the very DNA of God is cruciform grace, which is why when Jesus tells this story he's headed to the cross. Grace. You can't achieve it. Just receive it. I nominate you for God's grace bucket challenge poured out for you. Are you ready? Pour it down God.