

Annie was four years old and could make no sense of the flurry of activity surrounding her. You could see bewilderment on her face as boys and girls ran up to her and introduced themselves, "Annie, I'm your cousin!" or men and women would lean down and say, "Annie, I'm your grandpa or grandma," or, "I'm your aunt or uncle."

Add to that the sounds of bowling balls knocking down pins, arcade games with bells and flashing lights, the smells of popcorn and French fries; a confused Annie pushed in closer to the legs of the only source of familiarity, the woman and man who for the past few weeks called themselves, "Mom and Dad." That was Annie's introduction to her new big, loud, loving family.

Annie had been in foster homes since she was born. Differently abled, those who worked to find her a forever family had difficulties finding the right mom and dad. Her cuteness attracted many interviews, but the reality that she would always have learning difficulties turned many prospective parents away.

But the Mom she leaned against that day at the bowling alley was an elementary school teacher who knew about children with special needs and the Dad who kept close by was committed to showing her she was loved. And the extended family was ready to support her and believed in her and her new parents.

Sixteen challenging years passed and, one spring day, a much more animated and talkative Annie graduated from high school. She wanted independence like her brothers and sister, and she especially wanted her own apartment. She enrolled in life skills programs, learned as best she could how to deal with a complicated world, but even with all her efforts, couldn't find a job that paid a living wage. So, Annie lived at home while exploring every possibility she and her support group could imagine, never giving up hope.

I think about Annie when I read today's gospel. Jesus tells the parable about a landowner who goes to a marketplace to hire laborers for his vineyard. In Jesus' time, if you had no job, you went to the marketplace and hoped someone would need you. The able bodied, the ones with skills were quickly hired. The others would be left behind to wait out the day, hoping that someone might have miscalculated how many bodies were needed to complete the job. They waited in hope that a foreman might come back and hire them even if they were not the "best", and even if they had to settle for a reduced wage.

Jesus' followers would have known exactly what he was describing. Many of them either had seen this story unfold in their families or they themselves had been the ones left behind.

But in Jesus' story, something happens; something beyond the normal; something extraordinary. The landowner, not someone he hired, but the landowner himself comes to hire workers. And he keeps coming back again and again.

He accepts them as they are, inviting them to be his workers, even if they are the ones no one else wanted. And he provides the wage they need. He doesn't seem to care whether they will make him wealthier. He's not concerned whether they can each prune the vines or till the soil or pick the grapes with the same ability. He seems to only care about giving them something that makes them whole.

This was unsettling to some. For the ones first hired, the first chosen, who worked all day, who bore, as they said, "the burden of the day's heat," they wanted more, or maybe they just wanted the others to have less. What they wanted was the landowner to see them as better than the others. Remember their complaint against the landowner wasn't that he cheated them but that, "You made them equal to us."

Jesus parable wasn't about being generous with money. He began the parable with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like...". He is

describing a generous and loving God who cares about each of his creations equally.

God had tried to always tell the people that. This is what Isaiah was alluding to 700 years earlier. Isaiah asked the people to:

“Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call him while he is near.
Turn to the LORD for mercy;
to our God, who is generous in forgiving.”

Isaiah, is relating what God has spoken to him, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.”

I sometimes wonder about the rich man in Jesus’ parable of Poor Lazarus in Luke’s gospel, the one who went out of his way to ignore Lazarus while they were both alive. After both had died, the rich man seeing that Lazarus sitting in heaven with Abraham, asked Abraham whether Lazarus could be allowed to dip his finger in water to cool the rich man’s burning tongue as he sat in torment. (*Luke 16:19-31*)

What if the Lord had said, “Okay rich guy, I think you learned your lesson, come sit at the table next to Lazarus,” could he have done it? Could he have sat next to Lazarus knowing that Lazarus was eating the same food as he was? Could he have lived in a house knowing that Lazarus had an equal house next door? Could he accept Lazarus as his equal knowing that God loved them both the same? Or would he not be happy unless he was a little better off than Lazarus?

Sometimes people ask me, “What do you think it will be like when we get to heaven?” And I turn the question back to them, “What do you think?” Many respond, “I can finally relax, put my feet up, and someone will bring me a cool drink,” or “All I have to do is ask and I have an endless supply of chocolate,” or some similar picture of a reward.

Some even express that the level of reward is determined by how well you lived your life on earth. This is the case in the movie, "Defending Your Life," where the "good" people who lived a "saintly" life and are awaiting the next life stay in luxury hotels with gourmet room service, whereas "normal" people stay in moderately priced hotels with self-service breakfast.

Could you live in a heaven where God was generous to everyone equally or in a heaven where God forgave everyone equally or in a heaven where God loved everyone equally? And here is the real question. Could you live in a heaven where God asked you to do the same?

Maybe our answer is as close as asking ourselves, "Do I see myself as being generous, forgiving, loving on earth as it is in heaven?" Isn't that kind of what we mean when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?" If God asks us to be loving and forgiving and generous, do I see such a request as a sacrifice or a reward?

Annie found a job. Now 29, she works at the airport. If people need their wheelchair pushed to the right gate, Annie gets them there. If an unaccompanied minor needs a companion during a layover, Annie sees to his or her needs.

She rides mass transit to work. She gets up earlier than most people to get to work on time. She willingly works odd hours. She is dependable. And though her job does not pay much, with the help of a grant, she has her own apartment.

Annie had good days and bad days, gets frustrated and finds solutions, loves things and hates things. Annie is equal to me and you.

In the eyes of those who love her, Annie deserves her independence and its accompanying dignity. And I know there are people who don't believe she does; who don't see her with those eyes. But Annie knows she is equal, because that is what she learned from her family and the community who helped her with the tools to be self-sufficient.

What we learn of God's generosity, forgiveness, and love is learned in our families and community. Whether heaven is a sacrifice or reward depends on how we see our own generosity, forgiveness and love on earth. Because the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who leaves no one behind and asks us, will we to do the same?