A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, Rector

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16, Year A)
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In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

No doubt we all remember the film – little Orphan Annie, red curls bouncing, as she sang her way into Old Daddy Warbucks heart and, over time, grouchy old Warbucks gradually winning over her heart and ours. Through music and song, dance and play, John Huston’s now classic film explores, among many things, the heart of generosity.

On the surface of it all, of course, the generous figure is Old Daddy Warbucks, a business tycoon who has amassed such fortune that even the Great Depression has brought no visible change to his life. While some are losing the homes and livelihoods, and others are giving up their children to foster care out of desperation, Warbucks remains safely ensconced with Punjab and Grace and all his staff in a 130-room, 19-bath mansion. Out of his abundance, Warbucks invites an orphan, Annie as it turns out, to join him in luxury for a week.

Of course, this isn’t generosity at all. No matter what expense Warbucks may incur – a new wardrobe for Annie, a private showing of a film at Radio City Music Hall, a helicopter ride to the White House – for Warbucks it was, originally at least, only transactional. Concerned with his image, and thinking that dotting on a young orphan boy will help, Warbucks consents to take in a child. For him, it’s a calculated investment, and nothing more; a business exchange of sorts, momentary discomfort coupled with a modest financial investment, for an uptick in public image.

Now, we mustn’t blame or take offense at Warbuck’s initial proposition – its what we do all the time. It’s natural in American society – and, even more, in the human economy. We trade commodities, most commonly money, but at various times other things as well – fame and popularity, time and strength, insight and talent, reputation and connections – generally with the hope and expectation
that we will be rewarded in some way commensurate with the investment we initially made, the commodity we initially shared, gave, or sold.

Now, some transactions are clear from the beginning – walk into a store and you understand that, if you want to walk out with an item you will have to pay an price equal to the value of the item. So, too, in the work place – we agree before we work on what that exchange will be, my time and skill and effort for an equally valuable wage.

But we do it other places as well – on the playing field, athletes and coaches make friends with the refs in part to win them over; politicians and lobbyists and interests groups of all sorts get cozy with one another because they all have something the other needs and so exchanges, public and private, take place.

Our homes are not immune from this economy either. No doubt, we have all done it – we’ve cleaned up the kitchen, cooked dinner, gone an extra step or two or ten, not because we wanted to nor out of real concern for another, but because we wanted something or hoped for something in return – you know the words – “Hey Honey, I’ll take the kids, I’ll clean the kitchen, I’ll . . . if . . .” Perhaps it was a free pass to go out with friends, or a make up for something we already did.

Regardless, so much of our life is simply an exchange, a transaction of equally valued goods.

But that’s not generosity.

And Warbucks, at least not initially, wasn’t generous; he was simply human. Participating in the natural human economy governed by exchange and transactions of all sorts.

Annie, of course, was different, she lived with a different set of values; she played, if you will, by a different set of rules. Poor as she was, she was generous through and through. She didn’t stick up for Sandy, the stray and ragged dog or chase him down because she wanted or needed something from him; rather she stood up to the bullying boys and brought him home with her, but because she could, she had it within her to give and to do. She didn’t sing and dance because it made her popular with Ms. Hannigan, far from it, in fact! No, Annie danced and sang because she could, because she had it in her to give and to share. With seemingly nothing at all to give, Annie gave and gave and gave, with no expectation of return.
Annie lived with a different economy in mind, and characterized by generosity, abundance, and gift.

And these two worlds, these two kingdoms as Jesus names them, could not be more different. In the human economy, the kingdom governed by transaction, we begin with our need. I need something—money, goods, fame, time even—there is a scarcity of some sort in my life, so let us exchange. The problems with such an economy, of course are many. In such a world, we are fundamentally alone, naturally competitors with one another. Only in the best of circumstances do we become allies. In such a world, there is never enough, there is always something we lack. In such a world, scarcity is the foundation.

The economy of generosity, however, begins with abundance. We begin with what we possess—money, talent, strength, compassion, it doesn’t matter, in the economy of generosity, we begin with what we possess and offer it freely to others. In God’s economy we begin as neighbors and end as friends and family even. In such a world there is always more than enough because what we have we can always share. Such a world is governed, not by scarcity and need, but abundance and gift.

Of course, this is at the center of today’s Gospel. We can’t blame those early morning vineyard workers any more than we would blame ourselves for their anger at the inequality that the landowner presents. They have worked longer, through the scorching heat of the day no less, than their late arriving peers, they have born the brunt of the day’s labor. They are understandably exhausted and bear real human need that they alone are responsible for meeting. In a world governed by exchanges and transactions, but scarcity and need, their anger is understandable because they have given more and therefore, according to an ordinary human economy, they deserve more.

But that’s not God’s economy. God’s economy is characterized by generosity, through and through. And so the landowner gives and gives—gives what he can, equally. Notice that he’s been doing this throughout the day, in fact. He didn’t just become generous as the sun went down, his generosity has been on display since the outset. At the very break of day when the landowner first venturers out seeking laborers offer an opportunity for work, then again at 9 o’clock and at the noon hour, and again at three in the afternoon and even at the last hours of the day, he goes again, seeking out others to offer the same gift that he has offer all day long.

Such is the way of God: generosity and gift. It has been that way since the very beginning of time when God created the heavens and the earth, the moon and the stars, and the leviathan for the sport
of it – because they were a gift that God possessed. This, too, is the story of the incarnation, God breaks into the world as the Christ child, because God has yet another gift to offer, another gift to share. This, of course, is the story of the Cross which Jesus humbly takes up, not in exchange for praise, but as a gift freely given to you and to me. And this, finally, is the story of the empty tomb from which light shines. Through it God overcomes the darkness and breaks the shackles of death, not for his glory, but rather for our joy.

Friends, God’s economy has always been marked by generosity, gift, and abundance.

The invitation now is ours. We are invited to choose a new way of being, a new of relating, in this world. We can continue to the way of transaction and exchange, the way of competition and need. Or we can choose another path, one marked by a new economy of generosity, gift, and abundance.

I cannot promise that it is easy, neither is, in fact. Experience, however, shows that it is life giving unlike anything else, and in it we will find a joy and a peace that surpass understanding.

Friends, I invite you to take up the journey of generosity with God.