

"How have you been generous today," my teacher asked us. Her question was not "**Have** you been generous today?" but **HOW** have you been generous. (She assumed that we had all taken the opportunity to be generous, to open our hearts and minds to those in our path. After all, we had read the studies that showed that people who gave generously of their time and money were significantly happier than those who weren't generous.)

We might think of generosity as giving away money, or giving of our time. But the dictionary's primary definition of generosity is "the quality of being kind, understanding, and not selfish." (Merriam-Webster)

"**How** have you been generous today?" Everyone in our class had a different answer: a kindness expressed, an act of compassion, giving someone the benefit of the doubt, doing an unpleasant chore so that someone else didn't have to do it. Each answer revealed a different dimension of generosity. Each answer was a reminder that generosity is a gift, an offering... a choice.

Our class had just read Brene Brown's new book *Rising Strong*. Brene Brown is a researcher whose research digs deep into the dynamics of shame and vulnerability. She talks about how she came to understand generosity in a different way because of a question posed to her by her therapist.

Brene was on a rant about a number of people who had annoyed, hurt, and disappointed her, when her therapist asked her: "Is it possible that they were doing the best they could?" This question stopped her in her tracks. "Of course people aren't doing their best," Brene insisted.

But the question nagged at her, and started Brene off on another research project. She asked the question of groups and individuals: "Do you think that people are doing their best?" She began to see a pattern in their answers. People who were perfectionistic, judgmental, and hard on themselves were just as hard on other people. But those who accepted their humanity with compassion shared the same compassion toward others. When Brene asked her husband: "Do you think people are doing their best?" he thought about it for a long time before saying: I really don't know. All I know is that my life is better when I assume that people are doing their best. It keeps me out of judgment and lets me focus on what is, and not what should or could be."

Brene Brown concluded that choosing to assume that people were doing the best they could was an act of generosity. Rather than immediately jumping to judgments, negative interpretation, she began practicing compassionate generosity toward others. This kind of generosity isn't about letting people walk all over you, or not setting boundaries or having accountability. Rather, it is about opening up some space for a more

gracious narrative to emerge.

After reading Brown and, thinking about the question "How have you been generous today," I wrote "PRACTICE GENEROSITY" on a sticky note and put it on the dashboard of my car. I can't think of a better place to practice generosity than driving in New England. Someone cuts you off? Rather than jump to an angry judgment about them we can practice generous compassion toward them. Assume instead that they are doing the best they can. And that is just a tiny example of how we can practice generosity toward others and ourselves. Practicing generosity is a spiritual practice.

"How have you been generous today," is a question posed by today's gospel story. How have you been generous today Mary, Judas, Jesus? The disciples are distracted: eating, talking, plotting, worrying about the past, and fantasizing about a future that will never materialize. They are so distracted that they don't notice Mary at first; she was just a movement out of the corner of their eye. Mary brings her most expensive possession, a jar of perfumed ointment that probably was a part of her dowry. She breaks it open, pours it on Jesus' feet, and wipes his feet with her hair. The smell fills the room and they are stunned, shocked. This is what generosity smells like.

Judas objects to the waste of money. He tries to define generosity in the limited terms of giving to the poor. Judas is generous with judgment, hostility, rigidly committed to the pretense of *looking* good and holy.

But Mary is generous in a different way. Simone Weil says: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." Mary gives Jesus her full attention: she sees him more clearly than the other disciples do. She gets that Jesus will not defeat the Romans or be the kind of Messiah they expect. She understands that he will die. Mary sees that Jesus is doing the best that he can. And in this terrible story Mary blesses Jesus with this tender, generous, kind act. Rubbing the generous oil of kindness and love into the feet that will soon be pierced by nails. Perhaps on the cross the smell of that perfume is the last thing he remembers.

And Judas? Jesus knows he is doing the best he can. And in this repeating story of human betrayal and despair, God knows that with all of our brokenness, and limitations, and human foibles, that we are doing the best we can. Jesus is generous, forgiving, compassion itself. Giving himself without expecting anything in return. "Even after all this time," writes the poet Hafiz "The sun never says to the earth, 'you owe me.' Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky." How will you be generous today?" Amen.