



April 26, 2017

HERMENEUTIC OF GENEROSITY

In our everyday experience of the world, what makes the difference between grace and fear? What allows us to meet people with grace instead of bitterness?

To be more specific, what has shaped the man who works on the MBTA commuter rail and greets every day and every group of passengers with joy and delight? Conversely, what shaped Geoff, my old college friend? Every time we met Geoff for lunch between classes, he treated us to a comic rant about all of the injustices he had suffered lately. In his mind, his professors, his roommate, and his landlord were all out to get him. He minored in conspiracy theory, interpreting every interaction with the assumption of selfishness and malevolence.

When the journalist Tracy Kidder was interviewing Dr. Paul Farmer for the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (a great book, by the way!), Farmer sent him an email to say “I have a hermeneutic of generosity for you because I know you’re a good guy: Therefore I will interpret what you say and do in a favorable light. Seems like I’m the one who should hope for as much from you.”

I believe that what Farmer calls the Hermeneutic of Generosity, or H. of G. for short, is the proper Christian way of meeting the world. We trust that God has created a good world, and that people are created in the image of God. An H. of G. does not pretend as though evil doesn’t exist, but it does put it into perspective. An H. of G. allows us to understand how goodness is corrupted by stress, ignorance, and systemic injustice. A hermeneutic of generosity does not condone wrongdoing, but it allows us to meet it with grace instead of bitterness.

Maintaining a hermeneutic of generosity doesn’t come easily. It helps to have practice at it, and a community of people to encourage it, and the example of one who demonstrated it even with the worst of sinners.

Doesn’t that sound like church?

Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Wooster
Senior Minister