

Irrational Generosity

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Mt. 25:14-30

Do you remember the old Road Runner cartoons they used to show before feature films at the movies back in the sixties? I always went to the theater early because I didn't want to miss old Wiley Coyote trying to catch Road Runner. It was like watching my dog Dusty chasing a car or the Duke football team trying to get a bowl bid. You knew what the outcome was going to be at the outset. I think I liked Road Runner cartoons because of the poetic justice involved. Wiley Coyote would go to great lengths to create a complicated Rube Goldberg contraption to snare Road Runner, and invariably he would get caught in his own trap. "Hoisted on his own petard," Shakespeare would say; or as the Bible would say, "Swallowed by his own pit."

I

Sooner or later in life, we all learn that eventually justice does come. What goes around comes around, and the life we make is the life we get. My grandmother used to tell me that the bed I made was the bed I was going to have to sleep in. I didn't have a clue what she was talking about back then, especially since I didn't make my bed very often. But I do now. Our parable this morning takes a whirl at this life lesson. A man goes on a journey and leaves three amounts of money with three of his servants with no instructions at all about what they are to do with it.

The first two put the money to work in some kind of investment project, and when the master returns they have increased the money he gave them by a healthy margin. The third servant, however, was very nervous about this responsibility for his master's money, so he dug a hole in his backyard and buried it. He was afraid that if he invested it, he might lose some or all of it and his master would be angry. As it turns out, his master was angry because he *didn't* invest it. In fact, he fires him and throws him into a rather nasty place that sounds a lot like hell.

The fact that the denomination of money the master left was called a *talent* is ironic. A talent was the equivalent of 15 years of wages for a worker, a huge sum of money. The first guy received five talents, which would have been 75 years' worth of wages. At ten dollars an hour in today's dollars, that would have been \$1,560,000. Accordingly, the two talent servant received \$624,000, and the third servant received \$312,000. We are not told how the first two servants put their money to work, but they did make a tidy return, 100%. It must have been a hedge fund or venture capital fund. The third guy, however, knew that his master was a stern boss and was

afraid if he risked the money, he might lose it. He talked to a couple of brothers named Lehmann, but they sounded too risky for him, so he buried the money in his back yard. The problem with that was not only did it not make any money; it also lost value due to inflation. The master was so angered by his laziness that he took his one talent and gave it to the first servant and threw the servant into the outer darkness, a land called Regret.

II

Wow! What a story! Why was the master so upset? He was upset because the third servant was such a poor steward of his resources. The first two guys were very good stewards; they took two very large sums of money, put it to work, and doubled their money. I think their names were Warren and Buffet. But the third guy was timid and lazy. He sat on the sidelines and did nothing. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Or, if you prefer, “It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” That’s why the master was so upset: not because the servant didn’t make any money for him but because he didn’t use his talents. By playing it safe, he squandered a perfect opportunity to do something good with what he had received.

God has given all of us gifts: some more than others, but we all have gifts and talents. And God expects us to develop these talents and to use them to make a contribution to God’s world. That’s why we are here in the world, to give of ourselves in relationships at many different levels. If we spend 100% of what we have received from God on ourselves then we have failed to realize our mission in life and misused God’s gift. Ancient Israel did that. God gave her the mission of being a light unto the nations, but she shined the light not on the world but upon herself.

Some French existentialist said that hell is other people. I disagree. I think hell is *solitary confinement*, being cut off from all relationships. Remember Cain’s punishment for killing his brother, Abel? He was banished from his people, forced to live the rest of his life in exile. Some consider that a fate worse than death. For an extrovert like me, I can’t image what that would be like. When I was in seminary I used a song lyric from Paul Simon to demonstrate what the Christian life is *not* like. “I am a rock, I am an island. I’ve built walls, a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate. I have no need for friendship, it only causes pain; it’s laughter and it’s laughing I disdain.” Isn’t this a sad picture of a life? Paul, of course, stole this from John Donne, who wrote “No man is an island, entire of itself... “The perfect counterpoint for this was God’s words when he saw that the man he had created looked lonely and said, “It is

not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” And God told them to fill the earth and multiply and to care for the earth which he placed under their care.

So, that is the *real issue* for stewardship. Today we are dedicating the estimate of giving cards that we have filled out during the last few weeks. Stewardship is not just raising money to sustain a budget. It certainly includes that, but it is far more than that. Stewardship is about how we conduct our lives. Do we make good use of the gifts and resources God has given us? Do we invest ourselves in God’s world generously or selfishly? Or do we bury our talents in the backyard and refuse to put them to work?

God gives us all that we have: a planet to live on, water to drink and food to eat, a brain to think with, a healthy body for work, schools and libraries to learn, hospitals to heal us, churches for worship and service, art galleries and concert halls to lift our spirits, and football stadiums to spend our Saturday afternoons in the fall. In short, God created us, loves us, and wants a happy, healthy relationship with us. God also wants what is good for us and knows more about that than we do. When I was in college, I thought I wanted to be a dentist and marry a Jewish atheist. Shows you how much I knew. Thank God that he got my attention and diverted me onto another path, a life of service in the church, married to a saint named Elaine, who puts up with my foolishness more than you know. If we squander the gifts God has given us by not using them or using them only for ourselves, then we have missed a great opportunity to live in a wonderful relationship with our Creator, doing what we were created to do.

III

As you know, we are living in hard times: the stock market is down, our 401K’s are shrinking, credit is tight, foreclosures are up, people are losing their jobs, Detroit is down for the count, and the retailers are bracing for a slow Christmas. About the only good news these days is that gasoline has dipped below \$2.00 a gallon. But maybe there is a silver lining in this dark cloud. In Scripture, God’s people had a way of renewing their relationship to God in bad times. Even though they were tempted to give up hope and lapse into despair, the prophets brought a word of hope and encouragement. And so they were able to keep the faith even though they were in exile in Babylon and their temple lay in ruins back home in Jerusalem. In that critical

condition, the prophets said, “Don’t give up hope; even now God is preparing to return you to your homeland and to rebuild the city where God’s blessings will rain down upon you.”

Perhaps, we too, can rediscover the real meaning of life during these hard times –that life is more than food and that giving is better than receiving. I’ll never forget hearing my grandmother talk about giving food to people who showed up at her kitchen door during the Great Depression. My grandfather lost his business in the Depression and they had very little income. But what little they had they shared – and somehow there was always enough to go around. Remember the loaves and fishes and the widow who fed Elijah and her son and herself on oil and flour that should have lasted for only one meal and instead lasted for days? God has a way of providing for the faithful, even in bad times.

And so I want to thank you for your generous support of our ministry and mission by giving of your time, talents, and money, especially during these hard times. Without you, there would be no Trinity Presbyterian Church, and we wouldn’t have 41 years of great memories of following Christ and serving God’s world. Whatever your financial situation is right now, I pray that each of you will find a way to continue experiencing the joy that comes from being a good steward of the blessings God has given you. I don’t know of anyone who ever went broke by being a good steward. Let us pray..