

‘Daring Generosity’. Sermon first preached at FUMC Palmetto, November 16, 2008

In recent weeks, many of our lessons from the gospel of Matthew have included parables. Of all the gospel writers, Matthew includes the most parables and this because he has a major interest in presenting Jesus as a teacher. Not all Jesus’ teaching was given in parables, but much of it was. Let’s remind ourselves why Jesus told parables. It was not to baffle people with riddles. Sometimes we make his parables so complicated when we interpret them today that you might think that Jesus wanted to baffle people. But why would he want that? No, he simply wanted to get people’s attention and make them think afresh about things. Stories are usually a good way to get people to listen and to keep people listening. So, if we were in church last Sunday, we probably all remember that Stephen told *The Pineapple Story*. While we may not remember every detail, we probably all remember that we were challenged by this story to ask: ‘Whose church is this?’ Perhaps we were made to think afresh about our attitude to our time, our prayer, our gifts, and our service in terms of everything belonging to God in the first place. Now Jesus told quite a number of parables that had to do with ownership. In recent months, I’ve preached on two of his parables about vineyards that concerned our attitudes to giving and to living in general. In these parables, Jesus tried to remind his listeners, both those in 1st century Galilee and those in 21st century Florida, that we are entirely dependent on God for what we have, including life itself. God, as portrayed in his parables, is a daringly generous God. You remember at the end of the parable of the workers on the vineyard, Jesus challenges the religious leaders, who are grumbling about the people he mixes with, not to be jealous because God is kind, because he gives people far more than they have earned. Now in today’s parable Jesus has another go at stimulating our imaginations and inspiring us to respond to God’s daring generosity with a daring generosity of our own.

For the parable of the talents is not primarily about whether and how we use what God has given us, but rather focuses attention on the character of God. Did you notice how the third servant perceives God? He thinks God is harsh, arbitrary, and to be feared. Is this how we perceive God or do we have another picture of him? What picture is Jesus encouraging us to have of God in this parable? Jesus depicts God as a master who makes the incredible decision to turn his whole fortune over to three slaves. This indicates an incredible graciousness and compassion.

We see God’s generosity at the beginning and the end of the Bible. The first line in Genesis is: ‘In the beginning God created’ the cosmos out of chaos – something God did not have to do but chose to do as a generous expression. The last line in Revelation is: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.’ Now each of us needs to join in this Amen. True our lives and the inner pages of the Bible contain stories of God’s judgment. ‘But these do not counter the Bible’s witness to the character of God as generous all along the way, generous with Israel and generous through Jesus Christ.’¹ So let’s think again about Jesus’ way of reminding us what God is like in the parable that we’ve just heard.

¹ ‘G is for generosity’, Martin E Marty in *The Christian Century*, November 4, 2008, p 13.

A 'talent' was a unit of weight of iron, copper, bronze, silver or gold. The most common monetary reference was to a talent of silver, and that's probably what Jesus had in mind here. A single talent of silver was the equivalent of about 16 years' wages for the ordinary worker. So the rich man gave his three slaves some serious money to work with while he was gone. What is good about what the first two slaves do? They obviously take some risks in order to make 100% profit. Investing was no more of a sure thing in AD 28 than in AD 2008, even given the present adverse economic climate. What is so good is that they are willing to recognize the daring generosity of their master. They see how audacious he was with his gift to them and so they respond with daring, courageously doubling both the principal of the bequest and the generosity behind it. What they truly double is the audacity of the first gift. The third slave by contrast does not understand what he has been given. This is how we are when we worry about preserving what we have rather than responded to the daring generosity of God who gave us the talents in the first place.

After choir on Wednesday, some of us were talking in the church parking-lot about some of the surprises we might receive when we finally see Jesus face to face. We might be surprised at who else is keeping us company there. I quite often think about this final reckoning, not out of fear of an unpredictable, God, but out of accountability for all that I have been given in the here and now and not just tangible gifts, material possessions, or even abilities, but all the capacity to know God that I have been endowed with. I believe that when I see God face to face, there will be no pretense or evasion possible. Rather, this generous God will know how far I have tried to be like him. When we are called to account, the question will be not whether we preserved the balance sheet or the bricks and mortar, but whether we emulated God's daring and doubled what God gave us. Did we live in such a way as to build up someone else's faith? Did we speak and act in ways that helped others see a generously loving God rather than a grudging one?

I'm always interested to see what Noni puts on the front of our bulletin each week. Occasionally I request something specific to relate to the sermon, but usually I take a chance when I am due to preach, trusting Noni to pull out from the set lessons something significant. As usual, today I am not disappointed. If you look at the front of the bulletin, you will see a great description of God and his generosity. Unknown to Noni, it is a verse to which I drew special attention at our Bible Study last Wednesday: 'For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.' God desires us to be like the faithful slaves. He wants to be gracious to us. He is not secretly hoping that he will have people to whom he can be wrathful. Jesus' parables, including the rather scary ending about 'weeping and gnashing of teeth', are designed not so much to threaten us but to encourage us. They insist that we are responsible for creating what is ultimately our heaven or our hell. I think hell is not being able to recognize God when we see him. I think hell is having lived in such a way that we aren't capable of enjoying God's company when we get it: whether in this life or the next. The stingy servant in our parable wouldn't recognize the generous God if he saw him. The question is: would we? Do we recognize God for who he is as he gives us any talent we may have?

The point of the parable is a reminder that we are not measured by what we have to begin with, but by what we do with what we have. The story tells us that God has given each of us at least one talent, one gift that is to be used in the work of the kingdom. Now Mr/Ms ordinary, the parable suggests, has only one gift. The question is does he/she use this gift or rather waste time and energy pointing at the five-talent person and say: 'Well, if I had as much money as she has ...' or 'If I had as much musical ability as he has.. ; and so forth. 'Instead, I'll just sit back and guard what I have.' Isn't this why Jesus chose to tell the story this way, picking on the poor, timid, one-talent slave? Why wasn't it the five-talent slave who hid his money? After all, he certainly had a lot more to lose. As we've seen, a talent was a lot of money, and he had five of them. But surely Jesus wants to address ordinary people. That's what most of us are, ordinary people. For every five-talent person, there are hundreds of ordinary, one-talent people. So long as we blame God for not giving us enough, we'll lose even what we have. So long as we nurse the secret feeling that it's God's fault that we are doing well, then we are viewing God like the faithless slave in this morning's parable. Notice some further points about the attitude that the stingy guy displays. He calculates and compares what others have. Comparing ourselves, our possessions, our salaries, our abilities with those of others is always dangerous. As in the parable, we don't all have equal gifts to start with. This can so easily lead to resentment. You get this feeling with this slave, don't you? He is very conscious of being given little, so he deposits this little in a hole in the ground. He doesn't even try to do anything with it, but just tries to keep it and himself safe.

I was born the last of four children. The previous three were all boys, born one after another. After 6 years, I was an afterthought – well, not even that. I used to get tired of people saying to me as a little girl: 'I bet your brothers spoil you.' I used to reply indignantly: 'No, they fight me.' From my point of view, I was anything but spoiled. I was left out. I couldn't succeed in their play-fights. I couldn't go to the church youth club because I was too young. In the English Lake District, where my grandma lived, I couldn't climb the mountains with my brothers and my father, but had instead of stay with my mother paddling in the lake. But so many people kept repeating: 'I bet you're spoiled' that I once asked my mom: 'Am I spoiled?' She tried to explain that she hoped not, but that it was undoubtedly true that I'd been given a lot more than the boys, simply because she and my father were in a position to give me things that they hadn't been able to give the boys. Piano lessons, for example, were affordable for one, by the time I came along, but were just not affordable for three at a time. I also had swimming lessons. My mother who neither swam, nor drove, would take me on a 40 minute journey, first by bus and then on foot to a public pool. I sometimes think of all the time and money my parents invested in me, on the occasions when I play the piano, or swim, all these years later. They would, I'm sure, be pleased that I'm still doing these things. Life isn't fair in the sense that we are all given the same. I was given more than my brothers. Whether they felt this unfairness, I don't know. But I was given it and as all of us who play any musical instrument know, what you do not use you lose. Now you don't forget how to swim, but you can lose your ability to swim far and fast; again anyone who engages in any particular physical activity can testify to that. No one says: I know how to play this musical instrument or I know how to play a particular sport so I'll just hang on to this

ability. I won't expend my energy. I'll just hang on to this gift. I'll guard my talent. So with all our gifts we have not to possess but in some sense give them away.

Remember that our faith itself is a gift. We may be critical of those we know who don't have faith or who maybe did have faith but lost it. But this is to compare ourselves with others, as the mistaken slave does in the parable. None of us knows if we might lose our faith in particular circumstances. We don't need to speculate about this. Rather we need to be thankful for the faith that we are fortunate enough to have been given, especially when it has survived difficult times. Faith is a risk. There is no proof of our faith. Rather we have to keep living by it, daring to live generously, imitating the passionate, loving generosity of God himself. God is looking for spiritual entrepreneurs. He wants people who take risks. He wants people who will bet their lives on his generous love. 'Jesus could have told a parable with the message: "Life is a risk. In the business of living we can win, but we risk losing." The parable he actually told has a much more interesting and profound message: "You can take the risk or not, but if you do not you are bound to lose."² This is how life is, says Jesus. When you cultivate an attitude of generosity, you receive great gifts. It is in this sense true that 'to all those who have, more will be given'. It is also true that a grudging, self-preserving attitude, such as is displayed by the one-talent slave in our parable, prevents us from participating in God's daring generosity. In this sense, it becomes true that: 'from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

Thus Matthew's story is not simply an exhortation to develop one's talents in the manner of a self-development program. The parable has, you may have noticed, an eschatological dimension. That is, it concerns the end of time when Jesus comes again and we front up to the kind of God that Jesus has shown us. God is concerned about every one of us – about what kind of person we're becoming, what we're making of the life we've been given. And when at last we come to the throne of grace, to offer back what we have been given, like the master in the parable God will not ask: 'How many talents did you have?' but 'What did you do with what I gave you?' Were you daring in your generosity, giving everything back to the God who first gave to you? The old spiritual we sang earlier this morning, puts it this way:

'If you cannot preach like Peter;
If you cannot pray like Paul;
Just tell the love of Jesus;
And say, He died for all.'

² Richard Bauckham in *The Lectionary Commentary*, vol. 3 edit by Roger E Van Harn, Eerdmans, 2001, p 150