

Fear and Giving

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
November 15, 2020

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Matthew 25:14-30



Grace to you, and peace. We begin where we always begin – with a good and generous God. God is the bountiful giver of gifts, the one from whom we have all received, as the apostle Paul says, grace upon grace. The root of all good religion, the bedrock of our faith, is simple trust in this God whose giving knows no ending. The hymn text by the same title forms the context of our worship, and of our lives –

*God, whose giving knows no ending,
From your rich and endless store,
Nature's wonder, Jesus' wisdom,
Costly cross, grave's shattered door...*

Today's parable is a story of a generous God, pouring out a vast treasure of gifts for those God calls to be stewards. One servant gets five "talentons," which, though translated "talents" in English from that Greek word, does not carry the same meaning. A talent in first century Palestine was a large sum of money – the equivalent of fifteen years wages for a common laborer at the time. Scholars say in today's money one talent would be anywhere from 500,000 to one million dollars. The master in the parable is, in other words, extravagant in his generosity – trusting, welcoming, generous, and benevolent.

It seems a simple thing to affirm, but it may be the hardest statement of faith to maintain – God is good, God is generous, God is love.

Several years ago Caleb and I attended a celebration of the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept through mostly the southern frontier of this young country in the early 19th century. We milled around with people dressed up in their best 19th century frontier attire – men in tall black hats, women in petticoats. There were booths that showed how they made lye soap and churned butter and sewed on a loom. We even had to earn a token and present it at the door of a makeshift chapel in order to be able to take communion. Ah, the good old days.

As the hot summer day began to wind down, we took our places around an old wagon for a time of worship, billed as an authentic worship service from 1804, complete with an actor preaching verbatim a famous sermon from one of the preachers of the day. To call us to worship, the liturgist fired a six shooter in the air. This got everyone's attention. Caleb moved in closer to me, surprised by the shot, shaking just a bit. It was only beginning. The preacher came out and began to pace and yell, veins popping out on his forehead as he told us of the fires of hell, and how they waited for each and every one of us. There would be no escaping God's fiery wrath, he bellowed, unless you gave your life to Jesus right this very minute. A couple of times he was standing right over us, Caleb leaning back, the preacher's shrill voice pounding away.

When the preacher was safely far enough away, Caleb turned to me and said, "Why is that man so angry?"

"Oh, he's not really angry. He's just acting. This is the way it was back then, but not anymore."

Caleb's response, "Well, you better tell all those people behind us. I don't think they realize he's acting."

And he was right. Behind us was a group who were clearly agreeing, shouting amen, urging the hell-fire preacher on in his mission. I left that place hoping that my son would not forever associate God with the fearsome spectacle he witnessed that day, that he would not fearfully bury God's generous gifts in the ground of his own terror.

"I was afraid," says the one-talent man, "so I hid your money in the ground."

Why was he afraid? "I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." He knew, you see, he just knew that the master was not generous and trusting. Never mind that the master entrusted him with more money than he could hope to make in years of labor. His image of the master, conjured up in his own mind, results in a cramped view of his vocation. He has misjudged his gifts, he has misread the situation badly, and the result is a life squandered in fear.

The parable is told, as all parables are told, not to teach about things like sheep farming or horticulture or economics – but about God and God's kingdom. And this parable hones in on a truth that lies at the heart of all truth – God is good and generous and loving – as the psalmist says, "Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

John Calvin writes at the very beginning of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...For quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God.”¹

And so, if you know that the Master is good and generous and loving, if this good news has penetrated your soul, what will you do with this gift? That is the question of the parable. Matthew writes not so much to individuals but to the church, a church still waiting for the coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God. We have received the gift of the gospel now. How will we invest this good news – how should we live as a community of faith?

The parable extols a fearless, risk-taking faith, one that willingly invests into the world what we have received. In a world filled with threats perceived and real, this kind of fearlessness does not come naturally, but Matthew’s gospel proclaims that if we have joyfully perceived our God as good and generous and loving, if we are motivated not by a hidden fear of God, but by an overflowing love, then we can join God in the generous pouring out of gifts, even at the risk of failure.

I am grateful to be part of a community of faith that has such risk-taking faith at the heart of its identity.

This congregation throughout its history has tried, in good times and in bad, to consistently proclaim a gospel of God’s love and mercy and generosity, answering the call again and again to go into the world boldly, investing this treasure we have received, this giving that knows no ending. When we were in downtown Franklin in a growing community and land-locked, the leaders of this church boldly responded to God’s grace and purchased this property – the first thing out here. At a time of uncertainty in the wider church when the future was not clear, this church embarked on a capital campaign that continues to bear much fruit, including the purchase and installation of a new organ in the middle of a pandemic.

And in these days of crisis, you have opened wide your hands in sharing, you have been generous in giving, you have been active in worship, study, and service, embracing new ways to be the church. Why? Because God is good, God is generous, God is love.

¹ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.1.1.), 1559.

We are in a season of thanksgiving – allow me to say thank you to all of you for answering God's call and faithfully and fearlessly proclaiming the gospel, investing your gifts for the sake of God's glory. As the hymn says:

*Open wide our hands in sharing,
As we heed Christ's ageless call,
Healing, teaching, and reclaiming,
Serving You by serving all.*

May it be so. Amen.