

“Extravagant Opportunity”

Matthew 25: 14-30

27th Sunday after Pentecost/A, November 16, 2008

Lynne M. Dolan

I have often said the one thing I love most about this church is our willingness to talk about anything. There are some topics that seem easier to talk about than others. I believe we have had more frank conversations about homosexuality than we have about money. Most of us were taught the three things you don't talk about in polite company are religion, politics and money. That might be good advice for a dinner party, but I don't think Jesus intended for us to expunge such topics from our spiritual dialogue. We can not explore the Scriptures or our faith without including these topics. Many people think Jesus was reluctant to talk about money. However, if you read your Bible you may be surprised to find out just how frequently Jesus tackles the topic of money. It was hardly taboo. In the last several weeks the scripture lessons have had a lot to say about money. We heard Jesus teach his disciples to pay Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's. At first glance today's gospel lesson appears to be about money as well. Or is it?

Today's parable is a peculiar one. It is the second in a series of three parables Jesus uses to teach his disciples at the end of his ministry. The first is the parable of the ten maidens who await the arrival of the bridegroom. Half of them were prepared for his arrival and the rest were not. Half of them had extra oil just in case the bridegroom was delayed. They were ready to do what God had called them to do, no matter the circumstances. The other maidens did not anticipate the delay and they were busy getting more oil and missed out on the festivities. Be prepared is the message of this story.

Today we meet three servants whom the landowner entrusts with a portion of his business. Each is given a different portion of the man's wealth. Two servants boldly invest the landowner's money in his absence. When he returns they are happy to report they have made him a significant profit. The third servant did nothing with his share. In fact, he was so afraid he refused to even put the money in a bank where it might earn a modest interest. Instead, he takes the money and buries it.

As you might surmise, this parable is not really about money. It is not an endorsement of the ancient world's equivalent to the stock market. While Jesus uses money to make his point, he is not interested in investment principles. If we were to view this story in light of our current economic conditions it would be easy to identify with the third servant who played it safe. He was motivated by fear. He makes excuses and blames the landowner when he has not performed as the others have. This behavior is familiar to us. It is easier to deflect than to accept responsibility for one's own inaction. When the going gets tough, as it most certainly will, Jesus wants his disciples to act like the first two servants. He wants us to be bold and fearless.

This parable is about what we do with all that God has given us. If we believe that all we have is a gift from God does it then please God to be cautious or timid or lukewarm in our discipleship? Would God be pleased if we had millions of dollars in the bank but

were reluctant to minister to our neighbors? Would God be pleased if you had the gifts to teach Church School but refused each time the Children's team approached you?

You can tell the kind of people and churches that believe in their giftedness. They never hesitate to say yes. No challenge is too daunting. Instead of saying "why" they say "why not?" Instead of asking how can we possibly do this, they discern who might have the gifts to make it happen. These churches and disciples are humbled and truly grateful when the outcome exceeds even their expectations. For them, being a disciple is not a burden, but an extravagant opportunity. Jesus teaches says everything we have is a gift from God. However, there are some people that do not believe in their giftedness. The glass is always half empty. The bank account is one downturn away from disaster. They live in fear that despite their obvious wealth, something will happen to rob them of their abundance.

When a church is engaged in a capital campaign one might assume that the predominant topic of conversation will be money. How much money do we hope to raise? What will inspire generosity? Will we use all the money for our own purposes or will we tithe a portion to another organization? How will we make up a shortfall if there is one? Will we have to scale back our initial plans if we do not raise enough? These are just a few of the questions that have been asked by many people throughout our capital campaign. They are important questions. However as many of you have experienced, our conversations have not been dominated by the technical or economic aspects of the campaign. Our conversations have been more spiritual and much more inspiring.

When we gathered this fall to have a sacred conversation on race very profound questions were asked. Someone said, "why does it take a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina or a national tragedy like the events of 9/11 or the remarks of a particular minister in a presidential campaign to get people talking openly about race?" In the same way I would ask, why does it take a capital campaign to get us talking openly about our faith? Notice I did not say money. I believe one of the greatest gifts of the campaign has been the sharing of our stories. Each story has been a rich blessing. You have moved beyond your fear to respond in so many amazing ways. This sharing has fostered a spirit of generosity. You have been generous with your time, talents and treasure in truly amazing ways. You have done this because you understand that what you have is a gift from God and meant to be shared.

Last month the theme for the fall meeting of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ was "nurturing generosity." The keynote speaker's address was initially entitled "from the myth of scarcity to the reality of abundance." In light of the recent economic calamity, he decided to change the title slightly to "from the fear of scarcity to the reality of abundance." The question he posed to us was how do you nurture a spirit of generosity in a culture of scarcity? This is a challenge that faces not only our churches, but many organizations that seek to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our community. In these turbulent economic times it is a challenge to keep our fears at bay. When economic conditions are precarious some people respond by pulling back. We worry that with finite resources we might not have enough to meet our own needs if we

give too much away. What I have witnessed is that so many people have continued to be generous, trusting in God's abundant generosity.

Jesus teaches his disciples to look beyond the obvious to respond not from one's head but from the heart. He wants us to become bold and daring risk takers when it comes to the kingdom of God. Regardless of what the culture might say or the economic conditions might dictate; we are to be fearless. Being a lukewarm, fear-filled Christian won't cut it. When it comes to our discipleship Jesus tells us "make it count!" This is not a dress rehearsal. Some times you don't get a second chance. I believe this is what we understood when we decided to undertake the capital campaign despite the changing and uncertain economic conditions. We are not motivated by the fear of scarcity but the assurance of abundance.

Jesus knew that he did not have much time left with his disciples. He was desperate for them to understand, for them to be ready to carry on the ministry he had entrusted to them. Therefore, he uses parables that will leave a lasting impression. Jesus teaches us to be generous, gracious and grateful for all the blessings that have been bestowed up us. We are to be stewards or caretakers of God's creation, caretakers of one another, and caretakers of our gifts and talents, caretakers of our financial resources. What we have—our money, our time, the things we excel at, our possessions, you name it—all of it belongs to God first, and is just on loan to us. Until we believe this fundamental truth, we will never be the kind of disciples Jesus describes in the story this morning. We do not know why the first two servants felt confident enough to act extravagantly with the landowner's money. We can see that they were not governed by fear but rather by the awesome possibilities this gift would afford them.

Jesus says, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Some might see this as a preference to give more to the rich who already have enough and take from the poor the little they have. Rev. Beth Quick helped me to see this in a different way. She sees this instead as a statement that Jesus is putting us in control. She asks, "How do you perceive what you have? Do you look at your life—your money, your skills, your things—and think that you are lacking? Or do you look at your life and think, I can't imagine how lucky I am to be so blessed?" If we start counting our blessings, I know we will find our blessings seem to be limitless. As we are faithful with what God has given us, God gives us even more, so that our lives seem to overflow with God's love and endless blessings.¹ Go therefore to be bold disciples, grateful and gracious for the endless blessings you have received. Live with the assurance of abundance and each day will present itself as an extravagant opportunity. May it be so! Amen

¹ Beth Quick, "Abundance: Use it or Lose it?" sermon on Matthew 25: 14-30, preached January 20, 2008.