

SLD11.16.08 33rd Ordinary Stewardship
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 25:14-30
Genesis 41:1-8a
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What, Invest Now?

For me it's always a little uncomfortable to witness God lose the divine temper. Holy indignation has never has been one of my more favored aspects of our sovereign Lord. So in today's story, when one slave does great with the gifts of the Master, one does okay, and the third messes up big time, I can't help but wince a bit at the Master's response. "As for this worthless slave," declares God, "throw *him* into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Now there may be a variety of interpretations on this rather harsh divine conviction but at least one seems fairly inescapable, which is that, with apologies to Ann Hughes for language, God gets pissed with stingy.

So there it is, your first takeaway from today's sermon, your meditation for the coming week: "stinginess pisses God off."

"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." Apparently, according to scripture, some kinds of abundance breed more abundance, and some kinds of scarcity just breed more of the same. Indeed, those who imagine they have nothing to give will be cast into the outer darkness. Because the truth is, at least the way I see it, and if you'll excuse the double negative, nobody has nothing to give. And thinking so pisses God off. Which is about the best I can do with this passage.

Though the question remains why the Creator-of-the-Entire-Universe-Which-Is-So-Much-Bigger-Than-You-or-I-Could-Possibly-Imagine becomes so infuriated with the behavior of the not-very-enterprising-but-not-altogether-dishonest-because-after-all-he-gave-back-to-the-master-what-the-master-gave-him-in-the-first-place-only-just-not-with-interest slave. The only thing I can think of is that maybe to the Sovereign Source of All Life, that particular slave **was** altogether dishonest. Maybe to the Creator-of-the-Entire-Universe-Which-Is-So-Much-Bigger-Than-You-or-I-Could-Possibly-Imagine, stinginess **is**, in fact, an annoying lie, an irritating illusion, a selfish self-deception of fear, greed and anxiety all balled up into a tight fist ever ready to punch the lights out of faith.

And I wonder if that's because stinginess usually has a whole lot less to do with the *absence* of something to give so much as the absence of the *willingness* to give, the absence of the *intent* to share, which is usually rooted in the absence of *trust* that God will provide. Maybe that's why God gets so ticked off.

Still, who of us is not afraid that there *won't* be enough for everybody? Or more to the point, that there won't be enough for *us*. I mean, who among us has not struggled at one time or another with not enough money? Or not enough security. Or not enough love. Who of us has not, *is* not, worried about the future?

The assumption – and not just the assumption but the real life experience - that there's not enough to go around is called “zero sum economics.” You give to one thing, there's less for another. You withhold from one area of expense, there's more for another. A familiar, even automatic, m.o. to us all.

Add fear to the equation – like the slave's in Matthew's parable, or, say, the average investor in today's market – and we become even more attuned to the

dynamics of zero sum economics and, as a result, more tight-fisted and risk-averse. Digging a hole in the ground for your cash, or stuffing it cash under your mattress becoming increasingly attractive alternatives. After all, at least the slave didn't *lose* any of the Master's money, no small accomplishment during these lean, uncertain times. At least the slave repaid his loan and didn't have to go into foreclosure. Maybe his investment strategy didn't yield much, but it didn't lose much, either. And sometimes, like these times, that's the best we can hope for.

Except, according to Matthew's story, apparently the slave's strategy **does** cause him to lose something important – the goodwill of his Master, for whom something else besides clever financing or fear of the future seems to be at stake.

Walter Brueggemann, retired professor of theology from Columbia Seminary and reincarnation of the prophet Isaiah, gives a hint about what that something might be, when he draws the difference between what he calls the Egyptian Pharaoh's nightmare of scarcity and the God of Israel's dream of abundance.

You just heard Libba read about Pharaoh's bad dreams about the skinny cows and the blighted ears of corn. Recall that imprisoned Hebrew slave Joseph is called upon to interpret those dreams? At Joseph's advice, the Egyptians store up enough food during their seven years of plenty to tide them over during the subsequent seven years of famine. Works out great for the Egyptians, who, through clever investing, never go hungry. But the program doesn't work out so well for the Israelites, who apparently didn't get Joseph's memo. Unfortunately for the Israelites, in their own fear and anxiety about having enough, the Egyptians won't share.

Notes Brueggemann, ‘People living in anxiety and fear have no energy for the common good.’¹

So here’s the Egyptians with all this food stored up, and the hungry Israelites with nothing to eat. The first year the Hebrew people offer the Egyptians money for food. The second year, money all spent, they sell their cows and sheep, their means of production and economic independence. The third year, having neither money nor the means of making any, the Israelites sell their bodies, their lives. to the Egyptians, and become their slaves.

Thus did Pharaoh’s nightmare become Israel’s nightmare. Zero sum economics: limited resources, a nightmare of scarcity, not enough to go around, gripping tightly too your share, even *more* than your share because there might be even *less* later.

The headlines on Friday’s paper: “Economy squeezes Georgians.” “More seeking unemployment as things worsen. The skies have darkened in Georgia job markets, and most forecasters say the storm will likely grow harsher in the coming months....”²

You and I are currently in a nightmare of scarcity, are we not?

And we in the church, we’ve bought into it, too.

Have you heard that we’ve only received 32 pledges of the 48 we hoped for, and only \$155,292 of the \$250,000 we’d like for the coming year’s budget? Sure, 9 of those pledges are higher than last year, which is pretty cool in today’s economic environment, and 4 pledges are brand new, which is totally inspirational. Plus there are those who simply haven’t submitted their pledge yet, and still others for whom the

¹ Lecture at Columbia Seminary, 7/23/07.

² Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Friday, Nov. 14, 2008. Front page.

financial future is too uncertain to risk a full year's pledge at the moment but who will give as they can.

Still, our budget this year was \$315,000, of which \$222,000 came from pledges. That's \$222,000 vs. the \$155,292 we've gotten so far, never mind the \$250,000 we wish we could shoot. Plus, this is, what, the 8th year of our deficit budget? How much longer can we get away with that? Another two years...maybe?

And then what? Staff reductions? Leaner programs? Or, heaven forbid, we close our doors? Eeek. Makes me nervous, doesn't it you? And "people living in anxiety," notes Brueggemann, "have no energy for the common good."³ Shoot, I'd go further than that: I'd say people living in anxiety have no energy, period.

Yet, says the AJC, "the storm will likely grow harsher in coming months...."⁴

Whatever are we going to?!

Better be careful with what little we have in this church, hadn't we? Very careful. Better hold tight and cut back – get down to some serious budget cuts. Dig a hole and bury our puny coffers. "Master, I was really afraid so I went and hid your talent in the ground."

Except...oh wait...that would really piss somebody off. Who was it? Oh yeah...God.

God, it seems, has no time for the stingy, or the scared, or the anxious. "As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Apparently God has something else in mind for God's servants.

³ Lecture at Columbia Seminary, 7/23/07.

⁴ Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Friday, Nov. 14, 2008. Front page.

What Bruggemann suggests what God has in mind for God's servants is to join together to become "*an anti-anxiety community where people can begin again.*"

"An anti-anxiety community where people can begin again."

What do you suppose it would look like around here if we became 'an anti-anxiety community where people can begin again?'

I don't know. Maybe instead of looking at what we don't have, we'd look at what we *do* have. Like, generally speaking, things are going pretty well around the joint: no major divisions, a gifted and dedicated staff, successful repeats of fun events, people starting to join, babies starting to be baptized, you and I liking each other most of the time. We don't have so much to complain about.

Plus, people in this church are most definitely *not* stingy. In my experience, people at Emory Church tend to be quite generous with both their time and their assets, everyone genuinely giving what they can. Of course, we can all work together to cut costs – ministry chairs watching their budgets; all of us keeping our air and heating systems on low demand. And we'll do that.

But Brueggeman says what's required genuinely to break out of the pattern of Pharaoh's nightmare of scarcity, is an immense, unexpected and inexplicable act of generosity – like the manna God rained down from heaven, or the water that burst from the rock, or the walls that came tumbling down. Or the stone that whizzed into Goliath's forehead. Or the savior seeded in a teenage girl. Or the Son raised to eternal life. That sort of thing. An immense, unexpected and inexplicable act of generosity. A kind of rebellious raspberry in the face of the nightmare of scarcity.

But who of us can generate such a gift? Well, according to scripture, each of us – since to foil the nightmare of scarcity, God's consistently interested less in the magnitude of the gift than in the magnitude of the risk – take the widow's mite, the shepherd's courage, the woman's costly oil.

So I've been thinking about my own personal raspberry in the face of the nightmare. In the face of higher expenses than revenues, what can I do?

Besides our facility, most of our expenses in the church relate to personnel. And most of our personnel costs are me. I mean, while my compensation package doesn't turn any heads at Presbytery, it comprises over 25% of our total budget!

So as we plan the coming year's budget, I plan to return to you the 4% raise you gave me this year, and to shave off or rearrange whatever other expenses I can to reduce my compensation package. I figure that could yield a few thousand dollars. Plus, I'm increasing my pledge by slightly more than I can afford.

Hardly ranks as an immense, unexpected and inexplicable act of generosity, but as a personal act of rebellion against the current nightmare of scarcity, it gives me a certain satisfaction. Because the way I see it, my hope, *our* hope, is not so much in carefully managing our way through Pharaoh's nightmare of scarcity as in opening ourselves to God's dream of abundance, of a time when there is plenty for everybody.

That's the dream I'm investing in because I know that what God dreams will come to pass - not because we hoard treasures, or plan well, or manage carefully, but because God has promised it.

So, rather than feel anxious or powerless or uncertain about the future of this pretty little bride of Christ, Emory Church, I intend to do what I can, the best I can, with what God gives me, so maybe I can enter into the joy of the Master.

And what is the joy of the Master? Why, it's the dance of the Spheres, the laugh of the stars, the grin of the wind, the wink of the sun. It's the freedom of falling water, the fearlessness of a kitten, the peace of a sleeping baby and the trust of a dove. The joy of the Master is all the calm and confidence and playfulness and goodness and freedom that comes with feeling at home in the world and at one with the heart of God.

And *that's* what I want. And according to the gospels, because abundance is built into the system, into God's system, anyway, that's what we get – a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, poured into our lap. (Luke 6:38)

Pharaoh dreamed scarcity; Moses dreamed freedom. The Jews dreamed liberty; Jesus dreamed the Kingdom of God. We dream surviving a deficit budget; God dreams plenty for everybody. Me, this time I'm going with God's dream.

To the glory of God. Amen.