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A Bazillion

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on

The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost, November 13, 2011

In the fifth century BC, Xenophanes famously attacked the existence of the Greek gods. His critique was based upon the tendency of human beings make gods in our own image. He writes, "Mortals fancy that gods are born, and wear clothes, and have voice and form like themselves. Yet if oxen and lions had hands and could paint and fashion images as humans do, they would make pictures of their gods in their own likenesses; horses would make them like horses, oxen like oxen." I rather like thinking about horses painting images of the gods as Great Stallions stampeding across the sky, or lions sculpting god as the Great and Powerful Simba, or oxen fashioning the gods as Glorious Cattle grazing in heavenly meadows. It actually makes me happy to think these things.

And yet, with his amusing image of animals painting the gods in their own likeness, Xenophanes is making an important point. There does seem to be a human tendency to create God in our own image. He mentions the ancient Thracians who picture the gods as red heads with pale skin, and Ethiopians who picture the gods as Ethiopians. Xenophanes pointed it out five centuries before Christ. We didn't have to wait until the modern period for people like Feuerbach and Freud for this insight to be known. The human propensity to create God in our own image seems to have been around as long as humans have been around.

Jesus knew this human tendency to create God in our own image as well. In our Gospel lesson for today, the famous parable of the talents, Jesus takes up the issue. It's really not so much a parable about how we use our talents or wealth, but about how we understand God. And, as is always the case, in Jesus' hands, the issue of how we picture God takes on new meaning and unexplored depths. Because, for Jesus, not only is there the awareness of the human propensity to create God in our own image, there is also an awareness that our images of God have profound consequences for how we live: how we understand ourselves, our relationships to others, the way we face the world around us. Jesus is telling us that if we understand God as boundless and exuberant grace and mercy, we will probably see our own lives in a similar fashion. But if we understand God to be harsh and miserly, we will probably see life in these terms as well. In the parable of the talents Jesus is setting before us a choice. Do you see God as grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy, as unlimited and boundless generosity? Or do you see the

nature of God as harsh and miserly and punitive? Choosing one or the other will have profound consequences for the shape and quality of our lives.

Here's the story Jesus tells. A man is going on a journey so he summons his servants and entrusts his property to them. To one he gives five talents. To another two talents. And to another one talent.

Now, if you were hanging around with Jesus in the first century, and you heard the beginning of this story, you would have known right away that this was not a story about an ordinary person. You see, "a talent" in Jesus day was equal to about fifteen years of wages for a servant. One talent is about sixty to seventy-five pounds of silver. It's an enormous sum. So to one servant he gives seventy-five years worth of wages, to another thirty years worth of wages, and to another fifteen years worth of wages. He hands over about five hundred pounds of silver to his servants and then he takes off.

Now, to hear this story rightly, we should probably be laughing right now. It's as if Jesus said, Bill Gates called three mail clerks into his office one day and said, here's a bazillion for you, a zillion for you, and a billion for you. I'm heading out of town. Look after the Microsoft enterprise while I'm gone.

We might laugh because people just don't act like that. And that's precisely the point. People don't act like that. But when we stop smiling the more important point starts to sink in. Even though people don't act like that, God does. The God who created all things out of an infinite generosity, out of an infinite love that just had to overflow into all of creation, the love that moves the sun and the other stars, this God pulls back in love from overpowering us and says, here you go, look after things for me. An awesome, generous, and gracious God, who has given us riches beyond belief, if we would but have eyes to see. Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin, yet not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them.

The question Jesus presses home in this parable is: how do people respond to this extravagant and gracious God? How do we respond to the generosity of God?

In the parable, the first servant, the one who received five talents, immediately went out and traded with what he had been given and he made five more talents. Notice, it says he "immediately" went out. The owner pours out an extravagant amount of riches upon his servant, and he "immediately" goes out and does the same. He understands the gracious gift of God, and he responds in kind, exuberantly, extravagantly. He doesn't hold back what God has given him, but right away starts multiplying God's gifts. And when the master comes and sees how his servant has used his gifts, God pours out even more riches upon him, this time welcoming him into the eternal joy of his Master. This is Godly economics. God pours out an abundance of grace and mercy upon his servants and his servants pour out this grace and mercy on others. God says well done. There is now even more grace and mercy, enter now into everlasting joy.

This is the world of grace the first servant lives in. The second as well. They both see and understand the graciousness of God and the abundance of love and mercy God has poured upon them. And in response, they both go out and invest the grace they have been given by God in the world around them. The result is an overflowing of abundance, and the promise of eternal joy.

The last servant, however, doesn't get it. Like the other two he receives an enormous windfall. But instead of seeing it as the gift of a good and gracious Lord, seeing it as a sign of a world of grace, he becomes afraid. He has been given much, but he responds with fear rather than generosity. What should he do with so much money, such an abundance of riches? His "great" idea, driven by fear, is to go and dig a hole and bury the money. This is the action of a frightened man. This is the action of a person who thinks the world is out to get him, that God is out to get him.

This frightened, little man has convinced himself that despite the enormous generosity shown to him by God, that God is a hard Master, a miserly Master, a punitive Master. Notice, there is no reason given in the story why he should think this. Rather, this servant has created God in his own image: a frightened, hard, miserly little God. And the servant is so afraid of the false image of God he has created, that he fails to see everything God has given him. He cuts himself off from others. He digs a hole and buries what God has given him in the ground. He might as well have buried himself along with his money. Controlled by his puny image of God, this servant cuts himself off from the true God, from others, from his own self.

When the master comes and find this frightened little man quaking before him, he basically says, you have dug your own grave, so now you can go and lay down in it. If the way he responds to the abundance of riches that God has poured out upon him is to create for himself a fiction of a hard and miserly God, then so be it. He gets what he asks for. God tells him to take his puny little self and his puny little idea of God and go and lay down in the hole he has dug for himself.

Spiritual writers tell us that we become like the things we worship. People who worship money become human calculating machines. People who worship power become ruthless. People who worship the true God become fully human. Jesus puts before us a similar truth in the parable of the talents. It's a choice really. How are we going to respond to the extravagant riches God has poured out upon us, who poured out his very self for us? How do we see this God? Do we see the true God, a God of unlimited grace and mercy, forgiveness and love? Or do we create an image of God based upon our own fear, a God that is hard and miserly and punishing? Are we going to respond to the grace and generosity of God by going out into the world and living graciously and generously? Or are we going to be governed by our fears, and cut ourselves off from everything that is true and good and beautiful in this world, dig our own graves, throw in our talents, and crawl in after them?

That's the choice.