

Grappling with Giving: *Yours, Mine, and...*

On Thursday, we finally got a home phone--and just in time. Just in time for the season of giving, the season when worthy causes call and ask for donations. I don't know why this is the season for it--perhaps Thanksgiving and Christmas put us in the mood to be generous; but whatever the reason, this is the season, and we got our phone just in time.

Of course, the economic climate for giving isn't great--in fact, it's dismal. All of us have fewer resources to divide between even more needs. So today we're going to begin a short, three-week series called, *Grappling with Giving*. We're going to wrestle with the difficult questions that rattle in the back of our minds as we make decisions about what we give. Each of these messages will focus on one tough question, and we'll go to the Bible for wisdom in answering that question.

So today, our question comes from Mike; his real name is Mikhail, but we'll call him Mike. Mike came home from work a couple days ago, and opened his mail. Now, Mike's been a little stressed recently--cut backs at work meant that he's been working less hours and making less money, and always looking over his shoulder to see whether he would be the next one laid off. So, on this day, Mike was really hoping for a card, something personal that would lift his spirits. Instead, he found two bills and two request letters. One letter was from his college, asking him to give to the alumni fund; the other was from his church, announcing their stewardship campaign. Mike sighed, put down the mail, and went to spend some time with his wife and kids. About an hour later, during dinner, the phone rang--and Mike answered. It was the Democratic party--he wished he had never given them his phone number because now they called all the time--and they wanted to know if we would contribute to the Governor's campaign. By this time, Mike had simply had it. All of his frustration and stress and worry and fear came bubbling out at the chipper person on the other end of the line: "Look, I work hard for what I have. I leave early and come home late. I miss my wife, I miss my kids. I *earn* it--why should I give it away?" And he hung up the phone.

Now Mike asked a very good question. He was afraid of losing his job, afraid of not having enough to pay his bills, afraid of not being able to provide for his family, afraid of losing everything he had worked for. In his frustration, in his stress, in his fear, perhaps in his embarrassment, Mike asked a very good question. It's one that all of us have probably thought of at one time or another. "I earned it, why should I give it away?" Especially in a culture like ours, where success is so often measured in stuff that can be counted. When the good life is defined as the life that has accumulated much. Why would anyone give it away?

What wisdom does the Bible offer for us to answer this question? In the parable I read a few minutes ago, there are some insights that I think help to reframe our question, and not only reframe our question, but lead us to a whole new question. In this story, Jesus is describing to his disciples the kingdom of heaven. Now, when Jesus talks about the the kingdom of heaven, he is not talking about a castle that is going to float down from the sky--although that would be awesome. What he's talking about is the life that is lived in God's way. When someone asks, "Where is the kingdom of heaven?", the best answer I can think

of is this: wherever what God's wants is being done. So, Jesus is teaching us about life as a follower of God way, and he tells his disciples a story to illustrate what that life is like.

Here's the story Jesus told--at least, an updated version. It goes like this...A very wealthy and famous businessman, we'll call him Ronald Crump, decides to take a long trip around the world. But before he goes, he comes up with an idea of how to invest some of his money. He calls his servants, the maid, the butler, and the chauffeur, and decides to divide up the money by how well he thinks they can handle it. So to the maid he gives \$5,000,000, to the butler he gives \$2,000,000, and to the chauffeur he gives \$1,000,000. With no further instructions, no demands for what they should do with the money, he leaves on his trip around the world.

Now what will they do with the money?! They're each tempted to simply skip town--especially the maid. She has enough to live fairly comfortably and never work again; and the chauffeur thinks he can probably triple this in Vegas. But each of them has second thoughts about that. The maid and the butler smell an opportunity; this could be their moment, they could really show this guy that they have the savvy to be more than a servant. The chauffeur, on the other hand, is afraid--he's afraid he'll lose all the money, then he'll be in really big trouble, and when Mr. Crump comes back he'll hear those dreaded words: "You're fired!"

So, they each decide that the best thing is to ask themselves, "What would Mr. Crump want me to do with this money?", and then do that. So the maid takes her \$5,000,000 and decides to invest in commodities. She has a friend who cleans the house of a guy who is in the pork futures business, and he says that the price of pork is going to skyrocket in the next year; so she seized the moment, and put her money in pork futures. The butler heard a similar tip, only his was about a pharmaceutical company that was about to bring a new drug to market--a wonder drug that would not only make you healthy but also beautiful--and that this company was about to go through the roof! So he seized the opportunity, and put his \$2,000,000 there. But the chauffeur...with him things are different. He's heard tips, and he's had ideas. But he's also very afraid. He's afraid that if he puts it in stocks, he'll lose the money; and if he puts it in a savings account, it won't earn enough. And more than that, he's very afraid of his boss. If his boss comes back and he's lost any of the money that he was given, he'd be fired. So he takes his \$1,000,000 and puts into a safe deposit box--not a savings account--he's too afraid for that; a safe deposit box.

So after a year, Mr. Crump comes back, and calls his servants to see him. The maid steps forward with her \$5,000,000, and then hands over five million more. Sure enough, the price of pig went sky-high! Mr. Crump says, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been so faithful with this little amount, I will put you in charge of much more. You have made me very happy; come and be a part of the Crump family." Then, the butler comes forward with his money. Sure enough, the new drug was working wonders, and he handed over two million, plus two million more. And he heard the same thing: come on and be a part of the Crump family! Finally, the chauffeur comes forward and begins to explain how he was afraid because he knew that Mr. Crump is a very difficult man--he was afraid of losing money and he was afraid of making too little money, so he took what he had and put it in a safe-deposit box. Mr. Crump blew his top, he hair went all over the place! He yelled and screamed: you should have at least put the money in a savings account

to earn some interest. Then he took the million from the chauffeur, and gave it to the maid, and said the words everyone had been waiting to hear: "You're fired."

Now what can we learn from this story? If this story is meant to teach us about what life is like when we follow God's way, then what insights can we gain? Notice first that Mr. Crump gives the money to the servants; this is not money they earn, in fact it's many, many times what they earn. This is freely given to them. And this reflects what the Bible teaches us about what we have as well; that all we have is freely given to us by God. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift; everything that you and I have comes from God. Now we might think, "Wait a second, I work very hard for what I have." But if we press deeper, we discover that there is more there than just our efforts: where do we get the ability, the intelligence, the skill, the strength to work? Where do we get the courage, the self-confidence, to do a job and do it well? Where do we get the very breath and body to do the work? Is it not a gift? Was it not a gift to us from parents, and teachers, and friends? And were they not gifts to us from God? Underneath everything that we have worked for and earned, is there not a foundation of gifts upon which we build?

Imagine that there are two basic postures we can take with what we possess. The first posture is hands in the pockets, shoulders hunched, and it says, "It's mine, I earned it." But the second posture, this reflects the truth of our lives, and the truth that we find in scripture. In this posture, we stand with our arms out-stretched, our hands open and say, "It's mine, God gave it to me."

Now, when we realize that all we have is a gift, then we can ask the same question that the servants in the story asked when they received their gift. The servants knew that the best thing for them to do was ask themselves, "What would the boss want us to do with this gift?" And this is the question for all of us, as we look at the gifts and blessings we've been given--spiritual gifts and material gifts; the question is, "what does God want me to do with what I've been given?" How would God want me to use this? Where would God want me to put this? This is not an easy question to ask, because there are many possibilities for what God may want us to do, and many of the possibilities carry risk. It takes courage to ask what God would want us to do with what we have, to face the risk, and seize the moment--just like the servants in the story. Those servants heard of an opportunity to do what the boss would do; so they faced their fears and their doubts, and seized the moment. At least two of them did, and one did not.

And that brings us to a third insight from this story, and this one of the most difficult. It's tempting to listen to this story, and divide ourselves up like the characters in the story: those who are faithful and those who are fearful. But the truth is, the line between the faithful and fearful servant doesn't run in between this person and the next; it runs right through you and me. Each of us at some time is faithful, and we use what we have been given in a way that makes God very happy; and each of us at some point is fearful, and we guard what we have been given, for fear that we will not have enough. In fact, in many areas of our lives we find that we wrestle between faith and fear, between living confidently into the future trusting that God will be there with us, and doubting that God will be there and fearing that the future will not go well for us.

But notice this: the fearful servant is not scolded because he is afraid. Instead, he is scolded because he did not confront his fear; he allowed his fear to take control of him. All

of us are afraid at some point, especially when times are tough, and we are not scolded for our fear. But the story of this servant is teaching us that the pathway of blessing, the way of God, never lies in the direction of fear; it is always in the way of faith.

And so our situation is similar to the servants. We have been given much. And what we have is ours--God gave it to us. The question now is, What does God want us to do with it? And do we have the courage to do it?

*Rev. Patrick W. T. Johnson
Frenchtown Presbyterian Church
Frenchtown, New Jersey
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