



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“PRACTICING GENEROSITY”

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, July 13, 2008.

I am sure many of you have heard about the recent fall of IndyMac, a large California based bank and once leading mortgage lender. Just this past week IndyMac failed and was taken over by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. IndyMac customers with accounts over what the FDIC guarantees could lose as much as 500 million dollars, and this failure will cost the FDIC approximately four to eight billion dollars. This bank collapse is the largest of an FDIC insured institution since the Continental Illinois bank failed in 1984 and could be as expensive as the savings and loan crisis of 1988.

This event is just the latest in what seems to be an uncertain economic time in our country. Worries about a possible recession, concerns over the mortgage crisis, and fears of unemployment have been seen on the news and felt in the homes of people everywhere. And those people who have been hit hard by the current economy are also feeling the squeeze from the current price of gasoline and high interest rates on payday loans. Some politicians and experts are claiming that people are being taken advantage of. Some say that high gas prices are based not on the laws of supply and demand but instead guided by investors speculating in oil futures. Others claim that some payday loan practices prey on those who are struggling the most.

Unfortunately it is typical human nature for people to take advantage of others when they are in a tough situation. We were reminded of this in our Old Testament reading this morning from the story of Jacob and Esau. Isaac's wife Rebekah conceives and gives birth to two boys. Esau, because he is born first, is entitled to the birthright or the “conferral of rights and privileges on the eldest son.”¹ This birthright includes Esau having a leadership position in the family and also a double share of the inheritance. This is certainly no small matter: earlier in Genesis we read that Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. The birthright is of great importance in the family structure.

One day Esau comes in from the field starving to the point of death. Esau sees that Jacob is cooking a stew, so Esau asks for something to eat. Jacob agrees, however, first he asks for Esau's birthright. Esau tells Jacob that he is about to die and therefore his birthright is of no use to him. So Esau swears to Jacob his birthright and eats and drinks and goes on his way.

Now I realize that Esau is not without fault in this story. Obviously he doesn't have any respect for his birthright: the text says that he “despised his birthright.” But it was Jacob who “cooked a stew” both literally and figuratively, making a formal agreement and requiring Esau to give up his birthright for some food. Jacob took advantage of Esau when he was hungry and weak and extracted from him what had been given to him at his birth.

¹ “Genesis 25:19-34 Commentary” *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 522.

For us, worries about the economy and the possibility of being taken advantage of cause us to be very careful about what we give to others, how we spend our time, and where we share our love. I know that this is something that has been on the minds of people in this Charleston community over the past year. Rightfully so, seeing that it was just a few weeks ago that Al Parish was sentenced to more than twenty-four years in jail for fraud costing investors more than sixty-six million dollars. We learn very quickly that there seems to be a limited amount of everything in the world and that we have to be very careful not to waste anything, especially our money.

Every time my wife Kate and I go to Lowe's we seem to always have the same conversation. Should we get this item or not? Do we really need it? Is this item really worth our money? On our last trip we decided to purchase a device that scares the moles from our yard and a jig saw, but decided not to buy a weed eater. We only want to purchase what we will use, so we can be as efficient with our money as possible. Last summer we went to purchase some seed for growing grass in our yard. I spent some time figuring out which seed would be the best for our soil and sunlight conditions as well as for blending with the grass that is currently growing. I studied the square footage of ground coverage that each bag of seed contained and compared that to the area that needed to be seeded. We certainly didn't want to purchase more seed than was needed for the project. We even purchased a pushcart that would spread the seed evenly and efficiently. After preparing the soil for the seed, I carefully used the pushcart to spread the seed exactly where I wanted it to go. However, there were some small areas that needed to be seeded very carefully, so I put the pushcart aside and spread the seed by hand so that I wouldn't get the seed on the paved driveway or out in the road where I was certain that it wouldn't grow. I thought I did a pretty good job of spreading that grass seed.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus teaches the crowd using a parable. Eugene Boring writes, "In the preaching of Jesus, parables were not vivid decorations of a moralistic point but were disturbing stories that threatened the hearer's secure mythological world -- the world of assumptions by which we habitually live, the unnoticed framework of our thinking within which we interpret other data."² So what is it about the Parable of the Sower that disturbs our ways of thinking, our assumptions, and our world?

Well unlike the way that I sowed the grass seed in my yard, carefully and responsibly, this farmer sows his seed everywhere! Some of his seed fell on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. What is this farmer thinking? Is he crazy? Jesus is certainly not talking about a rich man in this parable. He is probably a very poor farmer who is able to make a living only if the weather is right and he sows his seed correctly. But this is the farmer that chooses to throw his seed everywhere and acts like this precious seed is abundant and unlimited. He even sows his seed where the birds come and eat the seed, where the soil is rocky so that no root system can form, and where the thorns choke anything that tries to grow.

And if this story wasn't farfetched enough, we read that this farmer's crop bears fruit and yields harvests of one hundred, sixty, and thirty times what he sowed. After throwing his seed carelessly about, he reaps a harvest beyond his wildest dreams. Jesus' little parable seems to fly in the face of our understanding of scarcity, prudence, efficiency, and carefulness. Once again our eyes are opened to new ways of living life as disciples of Christ.

Unfortunately the human heart, where God calls us to sow the seed of the Word of God, is much more unpredictable than the soil of the earth.³ We certainly do not know who will respond to God's Word and who will not. And while the soil of the earth is visible to the eye, we cannot see the human

² Boring, Eugene. *Matthew*, New Interpreter's Bible, p. 299 [<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt13x1.htm>].

³ Somerville, Jim, "The Reckless Sower" [<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=505>].

heart. And the human heart is precisely where God calls each of us to be like that careless farmer, slinging the seed of the Word of God in every direction possible using our time, talents, and treasure. Some people sling that seed through the words that they say. Others spread that seed through prayer. Some do acts of kindness and service with no expectation of compensation. Others spread the seed through the example they set through the way they live their lives. And guess what? Some of that seed will fall in places where it will be snatched up before it is even able to take root. Other seed will fall where it brings quick growth, only to die when trouble comes. Even more seed will fall where the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke it out. In each of these places the seed yields nothing. But for the seed that finds the good soil of the human heart, God promises an abundant yield: one hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was planted. So even as reckless and careless as it seems, we are called to sow the seed of God everywhere and to be confident that God will use it to bring an amazing harvest.

A few months ago a man came by our church seeking some pastoral care. He shared with me that he was in town for cancer treatments for several months and was looking for a church where he could worship. I spent some time listening to him and praying for him. His housing and food needs were being taken care of by other groups, so his only monetary requests were a one-month bus pass and some quarters so he could do his laundry. I purchased him a bus pass and gave him some laundry money and even went out of my way to replace his bus pass when it was destroyed and to visit with him. About a month later we found out that this man was a con artist who was probably responsible for breaking into several downtown churches, including ours. After this incident I shared with a few people that my heart had grown colder and that this experience was going to change how I see people who are seeking help. I was going to guard my time and treasure more carefully and make sure I give it to only those who are truly worthy. But Jesus' parable calls us to behave differently: to live in the reality of abundance, instead of the myth of scarcity by sharing our love, blessing, time, and money.

I felt my hardened heart this past week as Kate and I were celebrating her birthday. After dinner we went to get ice cream and passed a man who motioned to us asking us to read an index card he was holding in his hand. It stated that he was deaf and that he needed seventy-five cents. I shook my head as if to say no to the man, and we continued walking down the street. I thought he might use the money for cigarettes or alcohol or some other wasteful enterprise and felt justified in refusing his request. I told Kate that we would bring him the leftovers from our meal as we were leaving that night. But then I started thinking that maybe he needed the money for something important: a bus ride home, a phone call, or some medication. And so I returned to him, and gave him a dollar and a smile. He gave me a "thumbs up."

We never really know where the fertile soil is. Some people who appear to be the best soil to receive the Word end up being the ones who are least receptive to it or may even abuse it. Others, who seem to be a risky venture for the precious seed, are the ones who bring forth the best harvest. As we sow the seed of the Word of God, we have to throw the farmer's guidebook out the window and learn God's method of sowing. Tom Watson, a former chairman of IBM, once said, "If you want to succeed, double your failure rate."⁴

"Fred Craddock tells a story about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in one of the churches he had served as pastor twenty years before, and he would have sworn that if there was ever a person who never heard a word he said, that teenage girl was it. She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, drawing pictures on the bulletin. But when her father died, she looked up her old pastor, the Rev. Fred

⁴ Stoffregen, Brian P., "Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23, Proper 10 – Year A" CrossMarks Christian Resources [<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt13x1.htm>].

Craddock, and gave him a call. ‘I don't know if you remember me,’ she started. Oh, yes, he remembered. ‘When my daddy died, I thought I was going to come apart,’ she continued. ‘I cried and cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons . . .’ And Fred Craddock was stunned. She had remembered something he had said in one of his sermons! It was proof enough to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root.”⁵

It seems to go against everything we have been taught and especially worrisome during such an uncertain economic time, because spreading the Word many times involves spending our time and money. But God calls us to live lives like the reckless farmer, slinging the good news of Jesus Christ to everyone who is in our range, avoiding the trap of only sowing what appears to be the best soil or using the most prudent and efficient techniques. So take a chance on someone who might not appear to be the best soil. Someone, sometime during our lives took a chance by throwing some seed our direction, and by the grace of God it has taken root.

This past week I had the opportunity to make a visit at Edward and Mary Stuart Hay’s house. As I was leaving, Mary Stuart told her young son Elliot to show me his pumpkin patch. You would have to see it to believe it. In the front of the house, in the middle of a walkway of gravel rocks, there are several large pumpkin plants growing, with small pumpkins just starting to develop. Evidently last fall Elliot stated that he wanted a pumpkin patch and ran outside slinging pumpkin seeds in front of the house. And sure enough the pumpkin plants are growing. How can pumpkin plants thrive on a gravel rock walkway? Mary Stuart explained that there was good soil under that rock. Who would have thought?

⁵ Somerville, Jim, “The Reckless Sower” [<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=505>].