

Proper 33 + November 13, 2011

One of Britt's friends and colleagues, Marcia Engbloom, met an untimely death just a couple of weeks. Some of you knew her as she served as an Interim pastor at St. Luke's Episcopal here in Auburn some years ago. We continue to grieve her loss. Over the past weeks, people have shared their memories of Marcia and more than one person recalled how they were touched by her ministry. One of the things they remembered were her sermons and that she would usually end her sermons by posing a challenge to the congregation. It was as though she offered up the rich fare of God's word and then challenged the listener to take that word into the world in order to make a difference in the world. In essence, she would say, "With what you have heard and experienced of God, what are you going to do?"

It made me think of teachers or mentors I've had in the past. The best ones were those who piqued my curiosity or prodded and provoked me to learn more or do more. I began to think, too, of *lectio divina*. Many of you are aware of this practice. It is the name for a reflective or prayerful reading of Scripture. It involves deep listening to a single passage of the Bible with a good deal of silence and a few questions to ponder and pray. The final question is this: "With what you have heard in this passage, what is God calling you to do in the next week or days?" The final question provokes and challenges. In other words, how might we share the generosity and graciousness of God that we ourselves have experienced? What will you do with what you've seen and heard and have come to know?

What are you going to do? It's a great question for the people of God. The question is one we may welcome. At times, the question might make us squirm or feel uncomfortable, but it's a necessary question because we are called to use the gifts God has given to follow Jesus in an adventure that never ceases.

In the parable of the talents we see that two of the servants immediately took a risk with what they were given. It paid off. The other servant, though, took his one talent and buried it. He held on to it and because he didn't use what was given him,

the master was outraged. What caused him to hold on to his gift and bury it instead of using the gift? What causes you or me to do the same? Why is it that sometimes we are reluctant or downright resistant in using what God has given us to do God's work?

Over the years I've made it a point to say that each of us uniquely gifted and called to do God's work and more than once I've heard folks say that they didn't have much to offer or felt that whatever they had to offer in the vast work of God was puny, small or insignificant. At other times, I think I've heard folks quiver in fear. Sometimes we're just plain afraid. We don't want to take the risk of using our gifts for the sake of God's Kingdom. We may hide or even bury our talent.

I recall two or three daring souls who had a dream for a food pantry in the congregation I served in Portland. The need was great. Neighbors within just blocks of the church were hungry or didn't have enough to make ends meet. Some didn't like the idea of the food pantry. Others liked the idea but felt it too risky a venture. Needless to say, there was a great deal of resistance, aided and abetted by a good deal of fear. But, slowly, the two or three daring and courageous and visionary souls persevered and used the gifts God had given them and finally the risk paid off. Still, today the Food Pantry is operating and it is the ministry that continues to bring life and a sense of mission.

Even if it had not turned out so well or even if the dream had not come true at all, it was still a risk worth taking. You see, God calls us to take such risks in our individual callings and together as the body of Christ.

Why did the one fellow bury his talent? What made him afraid? What makes us afraid?

I know that I have not always been the world's greatest risk taker. I am, by nature, someone who plays things safe or wants to consider or ponder all the angels before taking action. Sometimes I have been downright fearful and that fear has

paralyzed me or prevented me from seizing great opportunities. It is in those moments when I have taken a risk where I have felt the greatest freedom. Then I am most free. When that happens I will take on something new or venture into new territory and in those moments, I feel a profound sense of trust.

God calls us to take risks. We are not meant to bury our treasure or put up our guard. And we are free to risk and use our gifts generously, whether we succeed or fail, because we are loved by God. God is our best resources and our greatest security, but we don't always trust that to be the case.

Fear trips us up. At times I think that fear comes from pictures or images of God that we carry with us that are not particularly helpful. At times we have a picture of a stoic God who sits aloof on a throne far away from the world. If that is the case, then chances are we will remain distant from the neighbor. Maybe our picture of God is one who is stern and judgmental. That kind of picture will instill fear in anyone. Or, maybe we have a picture of God as the town sheriff whose main task it to bring law and order. That picture isn't very helpful either. To respond to this God doesn't require much in the way of risk or trust, but merely means abiding by the rules. We may have a picture of God as love but that love may be nothing more than sweet sentimentality which may do nothing more than make us feel a particular way.

When we turn to the Scriptures, we get a very different and reliable picture of God who is actively involved in the world, passionately in love with the world, and working diligently for God's dream of justice to come true. That justice is about each person given dignity and respect and a sense of belonging. And Scripture testifies that this is the very task to which God calls God's people.

Now, that picture doesn't always look the same way. Sometimes God is rejoicing. At other times God is weeping over injustice or the people's unwillingness to love. And sometimes God gets frustrated or angry with those chosen to do God's work because they are downright complacent. That's the picture we see in our first

reading today from Zephaniah. God gets frustrated when God's expectations are not met. They are not the sweetest portraits but do not let them deter you from the rather consistent picture of God's love and God's call to you and me to echo this love in all the world.

Here's your best bet. Consider that picture of God who is love and all the ways this God is shown to us. Take them all in. They are all important, but always, always end up at the portrait of Jesus. In him we discover God in all of God's fullness. Here is the God who heals the broken hearted and forgives all failures, even the failures of those who are called to do God's work. And this same Jesus says to you and to me, "follow me." Take my love and generosity and share it with all the world. Use the gifts and talents I have given you and use them with great extravagance. Use them well. Take risks for the sake of the Kingdom. Go and make a difference in the world.

Do not be afraid. Live in trust. Jesus himself shows us the way by trusting the Father above all, and taking the risk of love that led him to the Cross. Cling to this picture. And remember that we have not been left empty handed or without help. For this God has equipped us with gifts and talents. In fact, Jesus will soon feed you at this table and we will be sent out with all that we need to make bold moves and venture into new avenues of ministry and service. So, with what you've heard and seen and experienced of God this day and as you go in peace, ponder this: what will you do?

Amen.