

# Sermon, Proper 20A

Matthew 20:1-16 & Exodus 16:2-15

Preached Sunday, Sept. 21, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard

By RDF

A few days ago, I had a daydream about my former profession.

I imagined that I was still a journalist, and I'd been given the task of creating a headline to try to summarize the news of the past week. I decided that if that had really happened, I'd have written the following words:

“Consumer Panic Runs Rampant at Gas Pumps and on Wall Street”

Now, I understand very little about economics or the fluctuations of the markets. But you and I don't need any formal credentials to know that fear and anxiety were major culprits in creating the recent gas shortages and massive swings in stock prices.

Spotty gas supplies were predicted with the expected path of the hurricane in the Gulf. But once the rumors began circulating, the predictions became self-fulfilling prophecies. People who already had at least half a tank full were rushing to the gas station to fill up. By then, it didn't matter that hurricane damage to oil and gas refineries turned out to be much lighter than was feared. The panic and the behavior that followed is what created the bulk of the problem. We saw a similar phenomenon grip Wall Street. Rumors and speculation about a government bail-out — or lack of one — sent stock prices through the basement floor and then back up again days later. By Friday, I felt very grateful that the market had to close for the weekend.

The connection I want to make between the headlines and the Gospel is this: panic and fear are not a good basis for making decisions — be they in the financial world or in the Christian life. Running scared doesn't benefit us in either realm.

There's an element of panic in the Gospel as well as our first reading. In the parable of the laborers, we can sense alarm in some of the workers when the day is nearly over, but they still haven't found work. Finally, the landowner hires them at five o'clock. Just an hour or two later, it's the longest-working laborers who are panicking and grumbling. “You can't pay these short-timers the same as us,” they cry. “It's not fair!”

The panic is worse in the story from Exodus. The Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, tired and hungry. They want to blame someone for their predicament, so they point the finger at their leaders. “You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill [us] with hunger,” they say. ‘If only we were back in Egypt, where we didn't have to wonder where our next meal would come from! But here we are — with no food, in the middle of nowhere.’ Notice that when they reminisce about Egypt, the Israelites don't mention the oppression and slavery they escaped when they left. But that's what fear and hunger can do. They make us lose perspective.

Both stories illustrate a big difference between God and us. Human beings have the unhelpful trait of panicking when we fear some kind of loss. Whether it's not getting paid as much as we think we should or fretting that our basic needs won't be met, we are not at our best when these emotions rise to the surface. Last week, when the rumors started flying about a gas shortage, my first instinct was to find a station that still had gas under \$4 a gallon — and buy as much as I could. But then, I remembered what happens around here in the winter whenever we have a snow advisory. A lot of grocery stores run out of milk, bread and other essentials. Inevitably, the snow melts in a few days and some folks are left with more milk and bread than they ever would have needed. And other people who didn't rush to the grocery store find some shelves empty the next day. I realized last week that our family had enough gas to last us until the stations around here got more. God had even provided us an extra car temporarily, with gas in the tank. But in my moment of panic, all of that went straight out of my head.

God is far less anxious and infinitely more generous than we tend to be. The land owner in the parable pays all the laborers what he promised them — even though he chooses to be generous to the ones who only worked a few hours. Jesus tells this story to illustrate God's benevolence and how it challenges us.

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God gives us more than we deserve or even realize we need. But if we stop trusting that, and start fretting about not having enough, then we will forget about what's already in our refrigerators and gas tanks.

God's abundant grace invites us to consider our own attitudes about scarcity and generosity. I don't know about you, but I can tell you that I don't always appreciate the bar being raised so high.

Once, a Sunday School teacher was trying to inspire generosity in her students. She told the 10 year-old children in her class about a wonderful missionary who helped feed thousands of hungry people in a far-away country.

The teacher then asked her students if they would give \$1 million to the missionary.

"YES!" they all screamed.

"Would you give \$1,000?" Again they shouted "YES!"

"How about \$100?" "Oh, yes we would!" they assured her.

"Would you give one dollar to the missionary?" she asked.

The children said "YES!" just as before — all except one student whose name was Johnnie.

The teacher asked him, "Johnnie, why didn't you say 'YES' this time?"

"Well," he said hesitantly, "You see, I actually have a dollar."

Another story tells of a mother who was preparing pancakes one morning for her two sons, ages 7 and 5. But as soon as the first pancake came off the griddle, the boys started to argue over who would get it. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here, don't you think he would say 'Let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait.'" The eldest son turned to his younger brother and said, "You know, Mom's right. So why don't you be Jesus!?"

Charity sounds like a great idea. But when the dollar is in our pocket — or the pancake is right in front of us — most of us would prefer that charity begin with someone else.

The Good News is that life and logic can teach us that generosity is better than the opposite. Collecting and storing up more and more stuff just doesn't benefit anyone in the long-run. Remember the so-called "Y2K" scare from eight years ago? Some of the experts were warning that our entire financial system and utility grid were under threat from massive computer system failures. I didn't know what to make of all the apocalyptic scenarios. But just to be safe, I thought it probably was prudent to have a little extra water and canned food on hand the last week of 1999.

I thought of this last week, when Maria told me about the gallons of water she had bought a year ago to have on hand in case of an emergency. But when she checked them recently, she discovered that all the water was gone. Each one of the plastic containers had sprung a small leak, and all the water had dripped out slowly and silently, creating water damage underneath. The same thing has probably happened to hundreds of thousands of people. And it made me wonder how many old cans of food are sitting around in storage rooms, some of them rusting or going bad...

Being prepared is one thing. But collecting and hoarding is something else. Basic physics demonstrates this approach will not benefit us. Here's how one writer puts it: "The greater the mass, the greater the hold that mass exerts. The more things we own — the greater their total mass — the more they grip us, setting us in orbit around them. Finally, like a black hole, they suck us in... We think we own our possessions, but too often they own us... Every item we buy is one more thing to think about, talk about, clean, repair, rearrange, fret over, and replace when it goes bad."\*

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Similarly, Moses warns the Israelites not to store up the manna God sends each day to feed them. It will go bad if they try to save it. God also knows that some people will try to hoard it and keep more than their share. If they were able to store it, many would eventually forget who brought them out of Egypt and who still supplies their needs.

Our challenge today is that most of us don't live like the Israelites did in the wilderness. We've added preservatives to the manna, and we can store it up for years. We have larger closets and storage barns to collect bigger and bigger piles of stuff. And we do this because it gives us the illusion of being secure and prepared. But when there's panic on Wall Street or at the gas pumps, we can get just as scared as the Israelites did so many years ago. Collecting, storing and hoarding just can't remove our sense of mortality or vulnerability. So here is the greatest irony: this fragile sense of our dependency — which we resist mightily — is a divine gift for our spiritual benefit. It's intended to keep us humble, thankful for daily blessings, charitable to our neighbors, and challenged by God's abundant generosity.

At announcement time today, you will hear about our annual Every Member Canvass program. Our theme this year is "The Gift of Giving." Part of me honestly wishes we weren't talking about giving right now, because of what we've been hearing in the news. And I confess that the timing makes me feel nervous and panicky. On the other hand, maybe it's exactly the right time. Easy giving isn't sacrificial giving. Most people will give even when it pinches — if we can base it on love and faithfulness instead of fear and mistrust. In the process, we might just find that generosity is the best thing for us and the world.

There was once a farmer who grew award-winning corn. Each year he entered his corn in the state fair, where it usually won first prize. One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him to find out the farmer's secret for growing blue-ribbon corn. The farmer said his strategy was to simply share his seed corn with his neighbors.

The reporter was dumbfounded. "How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors," he asked, "when some of them are entering corn in competition with yours each year?"

Realizing the reporter didn't know much about agriculture, the farmer explained: "The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and blows it from field to field. So if my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination would steadily degrade the quality of my corn. So if I want to grow good corn, I have to help my neighbors do the same."\*\*

In God's economy, my friends, generosity works the same way. We catch the spirit of it from each other — and in so doing, we grow an abundant crop. The more generous we are, the more generous our parish will be; the more generous our parish, the better-off our neighbors and our community will be. And so on and so on — until eventually, the circle comes back to our own doorstep.

To paraphrase the old hymn, "Let there be generosity on earth, and let it begin with me."

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\*Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (2002, Eternal Perspective Ministries), pp. 33, 51, 52.

\*\*Adapted from James Bender's How to Talk Well (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1994), n.p.