

Sermon November 16, 2014 - Carolyn M. Chilton

God, we thank you for your extravagant generosity. Keep us mindful of that generosity, and help us to have a generous spirit and share with all in need. Amen.

In 1980 – when music was still pretty good and fashion was still pretty hideous - my husband John finished graduate school, and got a job. We moved from Providence, Rhode Island to London, Ontario. From a cold place to a colder place. I got a job in the head office marketing department with Canada Trust, the largest trust company in Canada at the time. The Vice-President for Marketing was Frank Pratt. It isn't a friendly sounding name, and Frank wasn't a friendly guy. I was terrified of him. He was a big man – tall and broad shouldered. He was stern and exacting with very high expectations of his staff for hard work – BUT also for excellence and creativity. Frank, or “the big guy” as we called him behind his back, fostered a culture of creativity and innovation. What Frank couldn't tolerate was inaction and no new ideas. Marketing plans that were a first for Canada came out of our office – the new ATM machines were named “Johnny Cash” and yes, Johnny Cash himself came for the launch. Once we had a major promotion and the giveaway was a stuffed monkey named George. I no longer remember the why of the campaign or why we chose a monkey and named him George, but people loved it. We couldn't keep enough of those monkeys in the branches.

I was the person responsible for the signs – yep, signs. All the signs that were on the outside of our branches, on the inside...all the signs. Black letters on an orange background: “Canada Trust. Checking. Savings. Loans” What did I know about signs when I started that job? Nothing. What did I learn about signs? Everything. Frank patiently taught me about signs, people and leadership. He taught me about investing myself and my ideas in Canada Trust. He was only stern with me when I was inactive. I remember once when the Vice-President for British Columbia, Canada’s western province, was coming to the office. Ken was his name and his reputation was worse than Frank’s. I had to meet with him to discuss signage for all “his” branches in British Columbia. I was frozen with fear and anxiety. “Ken just wants to know that you are getting signs onto his branches, on time, and that they’re going to make those branches stand out from the other banks,” Frank told me. Action and creativity.

Frank entrusted me with much. He invested in me, taught me, nurtured my potential, and urged me on. Frank taught me the sign business, but he didn’t micro-manage my work. He made me ask questions. He taught me to rely on my community of colleagues and my own abilities. He taught me not to be my fears but to be my potential.

Like that Marketing Department, today’s parable has a stern boss.

The master in the parable is going on a long journey and he entrusts his property to three of his servants. To the first he gives 5 talents, to the second 2, to the third one talent.

What is a ‘talent’? A talent, in Jesus’ time, was money. It wasn’t until the Middle Ages that the word ‘talent’ came into use in the English language meaning “God-given abilities or gifts and graces.” Don’t you love that: gifts and graces? So a talent in Jesus’ time is money, and it is a large sum of money, equal to the wages of a day laborer for fifteen years. These servants were entrusted with a lot of money.

To entrust means to assign the responsibility for doing something; to put something into someone’s care. The master put his money into the care of these three servants.

What does the master tell them to do with these talents? Nothing – he doesn’t give them any instructions.

The master is gone a long time. While they wait for his return, the first two servants use their talents to double the original amount. The third, however, takes no risks with his talent and buries it in the ground. When the master returns he commends the first two for being "good" and "trustworthy" and rewards them with words of praise.

But then our attention is turned sharply to the third servant. He admits his inactivity but turns the reason for it into an accusation about the character of the master: "I knew that you were a harsh man reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed..." And the concluding statement of the parable confirms this judgment of the "wicked and lazy" servant, since even the one talent is taken from him and he is thrown out into the "outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Inactivity and accusations didn't work with Frank Pratt either!

Do you have sympathy for this third servant? I do. Poor little guy – he didn't do anything dishonest, in fact he was careful. But he didn't do anything - he just left the money in the ground.

I am reminded of my parents. They were teenagers when the Great Depression hit. My mother's family in particular lost all their savings and was quite poor. All of her life mom was wary of banks. She would say to my father, "I don't trust THAT bank – I want you to take the money out and put it in a jar and bury it in the back yard." My father would shake his head and say, "No Nellie, the money is safe. And besides it's earning interest and it won't do that in a jar in the back yard."

In the parable, the 3rd servant is also afraid and he does bury the money in the back yard – he does nothing with what has been entrusted to him. And we see that doing nothing was not what the master wanted.

The master in the parable is gone a long time and the servants have to wait for his return. Like these servants, Matthew's hearers had been waiting. They had been waiting 30 or so years for Jesus' return. After his resurrection when Jesus ascended to the Father, Jesus' return was expected within days, certainly in the disciple's lifetime. Thirty years later they're still waiting, but they still expect Jesus' coming to be soon and in their lifetime.

It's hard to wait. I fidget and fuss in the grocery store line. I blow my car horn at people who talk on their cell phones and don't move when the light turns green. It's hard to wait 30 years and still keep waiting.

Matthew's community, and those of us in the 21st century, don't know the time – the when – of Jesus' coming again. What we do know, and what today's parable shows us, is what we're supposed to be doing while we wait.

We are called to be faithful and active participants in God's grace and love. How are you doing this? Well, I see some ways - you're here this morning; many of you have brought your children or grandchildren. You give to the spread of the kingdom through this church. Your actions and generosity make a difference. Is there more that you can you do? Is there more that we can do together?

God has been generous with each of us. God has been generous with Grace and Holy Trinity Church, as have those who have come before us in this place. Look

up and around you – look at the magnificence of this place. Look outside our doors at the people we feed and care for, the people who depend on us.

But God doesn't want us to “rest on our laurels on Laurel Street”. God doesn't want us to let somebody else do the work. God doesn't want to wait until we have time. God is waiting on us – on you and me.

How can we accept God's generosity and turn it into even more abundance?

Truly accepting God's generosity requires our faith, imagination, creativity and risk-taking to turn it into something new and something more.

My mother was risk-averse when it came to banks and money, but she was a risk-taker in her personal life. She always welcomed the stranger, she shared what she had, and she loved everyone with arms wide open.

Through teaching and belief in me, Frank Pratt turned my fears into knowledge, competence and yes, signs.

Through God's grace and generosity, and the risk-taking and generosity of those who have gone before us and those who are among us, our Missionary Society was created – and how many lives have been changed through that generosity?

Through risk-taking and creativity our Friday Soup Kitchen didn't close down because of the construction – it became the Sandwich Kitchen, still feeding and caring for the neediest of Richmond.

Through imagination and hard work our choir hasn't stopped for the construction period – they just move from space to space, chasing the moving grand piano – so that they can practice each week and bring us glorious music on Sunday.

Our task is to do likewise - to turn our gifts into even more abundance so that God's kingdom in this place and in this city will grow.

Being a Christian is not for slouches. It's work. It's investment in relationships - with God, each other and ourselves. It's the investment of our time, talent and money. It's investment in prayer, silence and discernment and worship. It's investment in this church and this city. Being a Christian is not for slouches.

I often wanted Frank Pratt to just tell me what to do. It would have been so much easier for me. And less work on my part. Frank didn't do that. What he wanted was for me to use my gifts and abilities to figure it out and then just do it.

That is what God wants us to do too.