

Do you remember the Comedy Central series, “Politically Incorrect?” I don’t know if it is still even on TV. But on one episode – some years ago – I recall hearing the host Bill Maher describing religion – and Christianity in particular – in rather unflattering terms. For Maher, Christianity is entirely fear-based: Christians create fear, promote fear, and rely on fear to increase their numbers. He even put it in the vernacular of a popular TV show at that time, “The Sopranos:” “Do what God says or you’re gonna get whacked.” Sadly, Maher may be more right than wrong in terms of the Christian message that reaches most ears. Certainly that was his experience, and it is likely safe to say the Christianity he encountered and still encounters has left him in entrenched opposition. I doubt that today’s gospel reading from Matthew would serve to alter this stance. “Yep, the last guy didn’t do what God wanted and he got whacked!” But in this parable Jesus is not filling us with fear to compel obedience; Jesus is actually inviting us to participate in something extraordinary.

Jesus tells us a parable, a parable about the kingdom of heaven. He tells of a man of great wealth who entrusts his property to three of his servants before departing on a journey. We hear that he gives the first 5 talents, which is the equivalent of 75 years of earned income. A tremendous amount of money. The second receives the equivalent of 30 years of earned income, and the third servant 15 years. All of them represent remarkable sums of money. Now while the master is away the first two servants take what is given them and invest this treasure in the institutions that will create more of the same. And indeed these first two double what has been given them. The third servant, however, does just the opposite. He hides it in the ground. He buries that with which he has been entrusted. He does not dare risk losing this treasure. When the lord returns the first two receive praise, and enter the “joy of their master.” The last servant however is upbraided for his actions, and finds himself outside of the joy of his master, gnashing his teeth in outer darkness. He got whacked.

It seems so unfair, doesn’t it? He did not squander what had been given, like a certain Prodigal Son we all know... Why is this different? In part it has to do with the understanding that each of the servants holds about their master. The first two dare to invest what has been given because, perhaps, they understand their master to be “creator, maker,” and capable of the joy they come to experience. They seem to trust that what they have been given will be safe, and in fact is meant to be grown. For this understanding they are rewarded with the joy and abundance of what they helped to create. The last servant however acts out of fear. If Bill Maher wanted to find fear in this parable, he needs only look at the attitude of this last servant: his actions are dictated by fear, and it is fear that ends up isolating him. He paints a picture of the master as a terror, a harsh and selfish despot when in reality the opposite is the truth. The last servant seems to have no faith in the master and no faith in the people and institutions outside of himself. He judges his master and others fearfully, and in the end it is fear that bars him from receiving his master’s joy.

To really “get” this parable we ultimately need to get a handle on the nature of what it is that is given to the servants. The parable opens: “The [Kingdom of Heaven] is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.” Now the Greek word translated as property is “huparcho”, a rather rare word in the NT, and a bit awkward to translate. Literally, “huparcho” means “one’s being, all that one is;” in the context of the parable it gets translated as “property.” But Matthew – in other places referring to possessions or property – always uses a different Greek word. He has chosen “huparcho” intentionally: we are to understand that the master is entrusting all that he is to his servants. This parable comes at the very end of Jesus’ life, shortly before he is betrayed, crucified, and raised to new life. In this

parable Jesus wants to convey one thing: in his incarnation, his crucifixion, and his resurrection Jesus has given himself completely to us. We are entrusted with more than the material goods of creation; we are entrusted with Christ himself.

Now sit with this bit of good news in the context of the parable for a moment. We have been entrusted not only to receive Christ but to participate in “creating Christ” in this world. Jesus teaches us that we are to invest the Christ given to us in the people and institutions of this world that create more Christ. Which means we are brokers of love. Our world may be in short supply of other currency, and we may not be able to directly affect that situation. But we are the ones given the privilege to invest and grow relationship. We are the folks who have been entrusted to grow God’s love in this world.

Now I just said that to be this kind of trustee is a privilege, and perhaps that needs some qualifying. By privilege I refer to our self-realization of the magnitude of this gift and this task. Whenever I stop and really think about the invitation given to participate in creating love in this world I humbly recognize the privilege of that opportunity. By privilege I DO NOT mean that I am superior in any way. We ALL have been given the same Christ to grow, the same love to broker. If we truly buy into the words that humankind is created *imago Dei* – in God’s image – then we affirm that God’s gift of love extends to all people.

Which means that the institutions that grow God’s love – in theory at least – are limitless, and in many instances are waiting to be created. A dramatic example of this parable is the life of Millard Fuller, which exemplifies so well the extremes of burying Christ and growing Christ. Millard was reared in a poor, rural area of Alabama. Through hard work and entrepreneurial drive Millard graduated from law school and became a millionaire all before the age of 30 (at a time when such wealth was extraordinary). As his money, power, and prestige increased Millard found that his happiness in his life and marriage diminished proportionally. After years of soul-searching he and his wife Linda came to recognize that their wealth and power had become the “hole” in which they had buried all that God had entrusted them. They found themselves outside of joy, in an outer darkness. They gave away their money and possessions to the poor. Millard and Linda moved to Americus in rural Georgia, where he joined Clarence Jordan in a very risky enterprise: building homes for those living without shelter. Today, some 30+ years later, over 300,000 homes have been built, sheltering 1.5 million people, by the organization Millard Fuller founded, Habitat For Humanity. All because Millard and Linda saw that they had buried Christ, and had been willing to let go of fear to become brokers of God’s love.

Millard Fuller’s story will not be all of ours. The wealth that was his “hole” may be precisely the vehicle by which another person may participate in acts of creation. And Millard’s story is extreme and larger-than-life. But his path is really no different from our own, nor are the results of his trust and love in humankind. Do you really think that what happened last Saturday at the ALS Walk for a Cure was any less miraculous than the building of 300,000 homes? Can we really believe that the food you feel an odd compulsion to purchase, that then finds its way into the blue container in the parish hall, that then finds its way to the shelves of the Food Pantry, that then finds its way to the table of someone or some family who would otherwise be going without is any less miraculous than the sheltering of 1.5 million souls? The critical point is to find the Christ within us – uniquely framed within the particular and peculiar gifts we embody – and then act in ways that create and grow that Christ, that love, in this world.

Perhaps the part of the parable that resonates most with me right now is the importance of community and relationship. To grow Christ necessarily means lifting our eyes from whatever “hole of fear” that may be yawning before us and investing ourselves in growing the Christ in

others in every aspect of our lives. When we broker love we find and grow healing. When we broker love we discover grace and compound its presence in our sharing of Christ. When we broker love we excavate and grow our true selves and the true selves of those whom we touch. When we broker love we enter the joy of our master. And fear has no hold in such a kingdom.