

It's All About Perspective

Matthew 25:14-30

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Wilton Presbyterian Church

Dedication Sunday, November 19, 2017

On Thursday I had the pleasure of joining the Stay at Home in Wilton folks who were here at the WEPCO complex for lunch. Even better was the opportunity to sit next to Board President, and WPC elder, Peter Dodds! At our table, Peter told a wonderful story about perspective which he has given permission for me to use.

Years ago, Peter went on one of WPC's mission trips with MATE (Mission at the Eastward) up in Maine, a house rehabbing organization in which our congregation participated for many years. Peter was working with a young electrical engineer at an older woman's house. The young man told Peter, "You're going to see something in her garage that you've never seen before and you'll never see again.

The two went through the house but Peter went into the garage alone. Peter says his eyes were immediately drawn over to the corner, and next to an old electrical fuse box was a huge head of a strange and hideous animal from the porcine family...which he figured was a wild boar. It had obviously been preserved by a taxidermist. He said its upper lips had been elevated so it looked as if it were snarling. Its tusks jutted out from its lower lip, and its eyes had been pumped full of with red dye, making them ablaze and demonic looking.

Peter was flabbergasted. He wondered why this elderly woman had such a hideous creature? And then, if it was so valuable to her, why keep it in the garage?

When the engineer came into the garage he asked Peter, can you believe it? Peter said, no. I can't believe how terrifying that old boar is. The man replied...no...I meant the old electric fuse box. They haven't made those for 90 years!

Here two men were standing side by side, and they saw 2 completely different things. Perspective is everything, right?

The characters in this morning's parable which Jesus told, had different perspectives of the landowner, didn't they? Each slave was given a certain amount of money (a talent) entrusted to him. In those days, a talent represented a rather large sum of money. According to New Nave's Topical Bible, *one who possessed five talents of gold or silver was a multimillionaire by today's standards. Some calculate the talent in the parables to be equivalent to 20 years of wages for the common worker. Other scholars estimate more conservatively, valuing the New Testament*

talent somewhere between \$1,000 to \$30,000 dollars today. Regardless, it was a HUGE amount of money given their circumstances.

As we read, the first slave was given/entrusted with five talents. He invested it and made 5 more; He was rewarded greatly. Similarly, the second was given two talents...still a huge sum. He invested it and made two more. Likewise, he was rewarded by the landowner with far more responsibility. But let's spend a little more time on the third servant. He was given one talent. His experience, at least what is shared, was that the landowner was a harsh man, one who reaped where he did not sow, meaning perhaps he cheated, felt entitled or made money off what was not rightly his as his own profit. This made the slave nervous and afraid, and so he responded in reaction to those feelings and buried the money out of fear. He didn't spend it or take it. He buried it, and there it sat...safely in the ground. The same amount was returned to the landowner. You'd think that he would be given some type of affirmation. But that's not what happened is it? Instead, he was chastised in an extremely harsh manner. He got from the landowner exactly what he thought he'd get. He was punished and judged and the money he returned was given to the slave who had the most. That man was entrusted with even more. It became for him a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, didn't it?

I wonder how often this happens in our relationship with God? If we imagine God primarily as an enforcer of rules (even the 10 Commandments), perhaps we get hung up by the legalism of religion. Voices of those who believe that way have been extremely loud in our society these days. There's very little room for compassion.

If we visualize God as stern and prone to punishment, we may come to believe that everything bad in our lives is punishment from God, like natural disasters or mass shootings or illness.

When we see God as arbitrary and capricious, that's what we experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations.

On the other hand, when we view God primarily in terms as One who freely gives grace and is forgiving, we are surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. And when we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives and to share it with others.

What you and I see, all too often, is just what we get. As humans we project onto God our own thoughts based on what we have been taught or experienced. So, let me ask you a question to consider this morning. What do you think about when you think of God? I imagine if we polled everyone in here, we'd get very different responses, just like the story in the beginning. Standing side by side one another we may experience God in totally different ways based on our beliefs and our life stories.

But it's worthy of taking a few moments of silence to consider how God manifests Godself to you. Is God gracious or stern, loving or judgmental, eager for peace or prone to violence?

Let us take a moment to reflect...

Whatever your thoughts, chances are they are still not big enough. The scriptures tell us that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God is so far beyond any image the human imagination can conjure up.

But I promise you, if your God is too limited and small, your faith will follow suit.

This is the day we are dedicating our pledges of time energy and talents (both financial and God-given gifts) to the glory of God in the coming year.

So many of us don't like to talk about money in the church. But it's never about, or shouldn't be about the church asking you for money. That's a secular idea. That's what fundraising is. If that is your experience, I encourage you to ask God for a shift in perspective. Perhaps it's more helpful to see our giving as our response to God's generous love and astounding grace which we experience in our lives. The problem comes, of course, if our image of God isn't one of love and grace, but of rule maker, punisher or judgethen of course the gifts we give come out of obligation and resentment and even fear, versus out of freedom and gratitude.

Maybe you're like me. I have a variety of images of God which surface at different times. When I'm feeling fearful, my hands are clenched and God is stingy and withholding, and I project that God wants to teach me a lesson. Calls to give feel like I'm being asked to forfeit what I think I need and deserve, and I clench tighter. I don't have enough...and it feels as though it will last forever. This is a very old one which rears its ugly head sometimes. Fortunately I know it's not true...However, when I focus on gratitude for all God has given me and spend my time and energy in thanks and praise...it's pretty miraculous...invariably more comes. More love, more generosity, more of everything. My opened hands reflect the freedom with which God gives. God has remained the same. It is I who has been so fickle. Silly me.

Yesterday we gathered and celebrated the life of our friend and brother in Christ, Rob Wilkinson. Rob was one who saw God as a lover and giver of immense grace. He gave so generously to so many people, even in the midst of extremely difficult times, his faith in his "Heavenly Father" remained strong and his heart was always open to give more of himself in whatever way he could. We heard the stories.....

If we were standing in the room next to Rob would you and I share his perspective?

In a few minutes we are going to take some time as a community to give thanks for the blessings God has brought and continues to bring to our lives. As we sing our hymn of reflection, I encourage you to think of 5 things for which you are grateful---perhaps things even beyond your family...stretch yourself, broaden your perspective. Then, we'll have an opportunity to offer thanks together to the God who so generously has and continues to shower us with love and grace.

Amen.