

Stewardship I: Participate in the Miracle
Joel 2:23-32; Lk 18: 9-14

Luke's really good at setting up dichotomies. For example, remember 2 weeks ago when we studied the story about Jesus healing the ten lepers? The Samaritan was good; the other 9 lepers? Bad. What about last week and the story of the unjust judge? God (and the widow) were good; the unjust judge was bad. Now this week we have the story of the Pharisee and the Tax collector. The Tax collector? Good. The Pharisee...not so much...These are lessons in contrast that our youngest Sunday Schoolers could understand. No one wants to be like the 9 lepers, the unjust judge or the Pharisee.

Then, somewhere in the midst of these lessons, Jesus tells us that on one night, if two are together one will be taken and the other will be left to die. Guess which one that is. Not the good one – that's for sure. Let there be no misunderstanding. We don't want to be the other guy. The other guy compares himself; the other guy boasts. The other guy trusts in himself, thinks himself righteous and regards others with contempt. We don't even like to think that it's possible for us to be the other guy. We go to worship, participate in a small group, pray before meals – even in restaurants. Those aren't activities and behaviors of a pietistic loudmouth. Or are they?

The truth is, when we look at someone like the Pharisee, it won't take long for us to begin to see at least a hint of who *we* really are, too. You see, some of us really *do* believe that we're better and have more to contribute to society or to the good than the rest. Diplomas on our wall boast our credentials. Our conversation topics celebrate our expertise and quite purposefully and unabashedly set us apart as more knowledgeable, more capable, more educated, faster, wealthier, healthier than the average Alden, Beverly or Bo. It's human nature! We've accomplished a great deal, we've gathered a lot of knowledge, we've worked hard at life and love and we feel like we have something to talk about. Thanks be to God.

But I'll bet if we were to be in a room with, say, Michelangelo, we might become a bit more...humble. I learned something interesting about Michelangelo last week. As you are well aware, Michelangelo was one of the most revered artists in history. He painted the ceiling of Sistine Chapel; he chiseled the world famous David. In addition to his extraordinary gifts and acclaim, Michelangelo was a Godly, humble man.

Did you know that Michelangelo only signed one of his sculptures? - The Pieta in St Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Pieta is one of the most extraordinary sculptures in the world. Its beauty and craftsmanship are breathtaking. The proportions of Mary to Jesus are provocative. The resignation and love on Mary's face as she looks down at her dead son would melt any parent's heart. The Pieta is one of the most exquisite sculptures in the world, yet Michelangelo didn't even sign *it* before it was installed. He signed it in the middle of the night in a burst of prideful anger after hearing a fellow artist proclaim that such a

magnificent piece of work couldn't've been created by someone so young. Michelangelo was 25 at the time.

For those who've seen the Pieta in Rome, you might agree that it's perfect. You might say that it was divinely inspired. Apparently, Michelangelo believed that the work of his hands was God working through him. He believed that his sculptures weren't his mastery at all, but the Lord's. - Not in a boastful way, but he believed that he was simply using the gift that God had entrusted him to use. He believed that it wasn't for him to claim the product of his work; rather, it was God's to own. Therefore, Michelangelo believed that his sculptures shouldn't bear his name. He believed so fully that what he did in the world was of God, that none of his other masterpieces, including the David, have his signature.

Some people believe that all of life is a miracle that God intends to unfold. They are less motivated by the prestige associated with making it happen and more motivated by the privilege of being a part of God's work.

Deborah and I shared an incredibly coincidental thought last week about just this idea. It was grounded in the story of the Feeding of the 5,000. You remember the story, right (Lk 9:10-17)? It's found in all four gospels, which is interesting and unusual in and of itself. In the story, five loaves of bread and two fish fed 5,000 families. Do you remember that the five loaves came from the disciples and that Jesus' plan was to gather the loaves and multiply them to feed all of the people?

Let's think of how the story might've happened (of course, we'll never really know). Let's say that Peter, James, John, Thomas brought the loaves. And let's pretend that Peter brought two loaves, and James, John, Thomas brought one each. (Thomas, who is the doubting sort anyway, decided not to give his. He figured that all that was going to happen was that he was going to lose his lunch.) Do you think the miracle wouldn't happen with 4 loaves instead of 5? Of course it would've! Jesus wouldn't let one loaf of bread get in the way of making a four-gospel-worthy miracle! All that would've happened would've been that Thomas didn't get to be a part of the miracle! Do you think Peter was twice as much of a participant as James or John, just because he brought two loaves instead of one? Of course not - he just brought the loaves he had, same as the others. But if we further suppose that John was hiding an extra loaf in his tunic, would the miracle have changed? Not for the 5,000, but certainly for John. Because then we can say that John wouldn't've been able to fully participate in the miracle. We could also say that John had feeble faith.

The true work of God will happen with or without a particular individual or situation or circumstance. The true miracles of our Lord will happen because God needs them to happen. The true miracles of our Lord will happen with or without someone boasting of his contribution - or holding back. Like the feeding of the 5000, some things just happen, whether they're done by full participation, anonymous contributions or by posting names on a wall.

At a museum in my town, a campaign was launched to generate a meaningful amount of money for a new wing. A certain group of people was approached to donate at a certain level. One man offered not to give that certain amount but 50% more if each member of the group agreed to be listed as an Anonymous giver. The response was immediate and

unanimous: No! The overriding opinion of the group was that people should be openly recognized for their generosity if we're to expect them to give to something so big and public. Fortunately, the church doesn't work that way.

Stewardship campaigns are, for all intents and purposes, anonymous. There are only a couple of bookkeeping types who know anything at all about what you pledge and give. To some, that's frustrating. Some of us want people to know what we contribute so that we might finally get some notice. Some of us want people to know what we contribute so that we might get better treatment around here. Well, that won't work, because our giving is, well, anonymous. To some, that's a relief. We give what we're able, but wish we could do more. (In stewardship campaigns, we always hear about people who have limited means; we are giving what we can, and feel awful that it can't be more.) Or to some, it's a relief because we just like to keep money matters private (like good WASPY stock?). Then to still others, it's a relief, but from a different angle. We choose to give hardly at all and are glad to be able to hide. Or we give not at all and don't really care what difference it makes to the body.

If we're giving what we can but feeling sad, or guilty or proud, then we're measuring ourselves by the standards of the world. The world says to rank donors by how much one gives; God isn't measuring us that way. The good news is that like God makes the miracle happen, God makes the church happen.

This year, as you're contemplating what you are able to give to the church, plan to participate in the miracle to whatever extent you're able. Especially if you've not felt like you've been in a position to pledge at all these last couple of years in the recession, pledge this year even a dollar a week or five a month. Others among us might take the challenge and stretch yourself this year to a significant percentage more than last knowing that you can come to my office *at any time* and ask for a refund if times get tighter than you could possibly anticipate right now or if you don't think you're getting your money's worth.

This year, I hope that you'll participate in the miracle in this particular church and around the world. Where else can you get a money-back guarantee with such divine implications?