

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“The People of God: Living a Legacy”

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November 2, 2014

Deuteronomy 8:11-20

Matthew 25:14-30

You could hear the growing desperation in each of the letters. The year was 1904 and E.J. and Bessie were watching their father lose the family fortune. Their Grandfather Joseph Phelon had been one of the great early entrepreneurs of rural New York in the early 19th century. He had first made money selling clothing to the Army during the War of 1812. He then joined a partnership to bring the first throstle, or automated, multi spindle, wool and cotton spinning machine, to that part of the United States. From there he went on to breed cattle and delved into improved agricultural methods. He amassed a fortune. Unfortunately, as our family history puts it, his son Edward was not of the same mind. Instead of seeing all that his father had bequeathed him as a legacy, he saw it as his own private fortune to be spent anyway he wanted; race horses, playing the stock market and the like. It was not long before the only thing that remained of the legacy he had been given was the house, Willow Hill, and a couple of hundred acres; which only remained because his daughter Bessie was as industrious as her grandfather. For better or for worse, this is often the way of the world. Studies have shown that of family fortunes, 70% are gone after the first generation and 90% after the second. A legacy then is only a legacy when future generations work to maintain it.

This was in a sense the heart of both of our lessons this morning. In Deuteronomy, which is considered Moses' last sermon to the people of Israel before they moved from the wilderness to the land of promise, he reminds them of the legacy they had been given. The legacy they had been given was multifaceted. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt where they had been for four-hundred years. God had led them through the “great and terrible wilderness,” an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. God fed them with manna, provided water to drink and quail to feast upon. God is also telling them that when they get to the land of promise things will go well. Their received legacy will also include fine houses, flocks and herds galore and financial success. When this happens God says, they are not to say to themselves, as did Edward Phelon, “the power and might of my own hand has gotten me this wealth” and forget that it is God who has given you this, because then, comes the implication, you will lose it. The legacy was theirs to keep or lose.

Jesus' story is focused in the same direction. As he tells it, a man went on a journey and, in preparation, entrusted his fortune to his slaves. Each was given a different amount of money. In a sense they were each given part of the legacy of the owner; with no instructions as to what to do with the funds they had been given. The first two appear to understand that what they had received was not theirs to merely watch over, but was a legacy they were to invest and grow. This they did. Each worked hard and made a 100% return on the legacy they had been given (don't we wish). For this they were celebrated by their master who gave them greater responsibility as part of their reward. The third however made an assumption about his master, that it would be a safer bet to simply maintain the principle he had been given, than to risk it in chancy endeavors. Needless to say the master

was not pleased. He was not pleased because in the end it was not the amount of the return that mattered, but the fact that the legacy he had given them was to be risked for a greater reward.

What do these stories have to do with us? What they have to do with us is that they remind us that we are inheritors of a great legacy. Our legacy stretches back more than three-thousand years to the giving of God's Law and the Prophets who upheld it. Our legacy stretches back more than two-thousand years to the beginning of the Church and to all of those saints, martyrs, theologians and early Christians who kept it alive. Our legacy stretches back five-hundred years to the Reformation when men and women risked their lives to form a new kind of church. Our legacy stretches back one-hundred-eighty years in this church when people living on the frontier decided that Birmingham needed a Presbyterian presence. Over all of those years, ordinary men and women, understood what they had been given was a legacy; that it was not theirs to use as they pleased but as God called them to so do. Thus they worshipped, taught, served and sacrificed so that generations to come would hear the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, and that lives would be changed for the better through what they had done.

Now, it is up to us. We have been given this great legacy and the question is what will we do with it? My hope and prayer is that we will not simply maintain it, but that we will build upon it; that we will join with that great cloud of witnesses whose names you heard read in the necrology (the reading of the names of church members who had died in the past year) this morning and work to make Everybody's Church a place where all people can come, be engulfed in God's love and grace and have their lives changed for the better. I encourage you then to prayerfully consider what you would give to the life and work of this church next week when together we dedicate our pledges for 2015. For this is our opportunity to take what God has given us and continue to make it live for generations to come.

My challenge then to you is to ask, "What will I give to grow the legacy of First Presbyterian Church that not only I, but generations unborn might be changed by what goes on in this place?"