

Productive Gratitude

Matthew 25:14-30

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili is someone who makes the most with what he is given. I shared with you last Sunday about Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi, as well as in the November newsletter a few reasons why he and his congregation are remarkable. But back in 2000 when he sent out an appeal to his friends around the world to help his church relieve the suffering of Chechen refugees, even he couldn't have envisioned what would become of it.

This was no easy call for charity. Consider the context and background. The second Chechen-Russian war broke out in 1999 in what would be another unsuccessful attempt at independence from Russian rule. Chechnya, a Russian Republic, exists in the mountainous region of the Caucasus along the northern border of Georgia. Chechens are historically (and notoriously) fierce warriors, even now responsible (or blamed) for terrorist acts throughout Russia.

In a similar vein, Georgians have had their own harsh and painful history with these northern neighbors. In the early 1990s, after the Soviet Union collapsed, Chechens would fight as mercenaries alongside their fellow Muslim extremists. Long before ISIS, reports routinely surfaced of Chechen fighters executing Georgian villagers in public squares and gruesomely playing soccer with their decapitated heads. Even as far back as the Middle Ages, many Chechens made their livelihood kidnapping Georgian youth and selling them in the slave market to Constantinople (Istanbul). So, when Chechen villages were ruthlessly bombed by the Russian army or, in turn, the despised Russians were being brutally attacked by Chechen rebels, Georgians universally took delight in a mutual

slaughter of their enemies. The historic hatred was deep and visceral and the hostility remains to this day.

In the fall of 1999, to escape the war, Chechen refugees fled south across the mountains down into Georgia. Children and adults, youth and elderly together sought relief and safety in a country that wanted nothing to do with them. Aside from the fact that they were Chechen, the refugees typically were Muslim entering a land dominated by the Georgian Orthodox Church. For most Georgians, there was little sympathy or spiritual motivation to assist these vulnerable people.

However, the good folks at Peace Cathedral were an exception. In Malkhaz's own words:

When we learned that the Chechen people were coming to Georgia as refugees, we did not know how to handle it. Reports were coming on a daily basis of their suffering. They did not have food or clothes. There were mainly children and women. Christmas was drawing nearer and I asked the congregation, "What should we do for the refugees from Chechnya?" There was silence in the congregation and I knew what the silence meant because I felt the same way that they did. If you hear that your traditional enemies are coming here and they are suffering, somewhere in the bottom of your heart you are somewhat delighted. But then we realized that Christmas was drawing nearer and we contemplated the Advent season. We are fasting during the Advent season and we thought we should do something for the refugees because we are Christian. ¹

The inspiration for them to act came from their faith, as well as from the charitable work the women of the church began a few years earlier in a new ministry called the Order of St. Nino, named for the one who brought Christianity to their homeland in the 4th century and who serves as the patron saint of Georgians.² To address the Chechen crisis, though, was a controversial call within the church (and even more so in the general public), but once they began these hearts of mercy could not turn back.

¹ Verbatim from an interview with Malkhaz Songulashvili at SCUPE in Chicago, 2011.

² In 1992, in response to a challenge by the European Baptist Women's Union, a group of women from Peace Cathedral began to reach out to those going through hardship, by providing food, clothing, medicine, and cleaning of clothes. With the assistance of German Baptists, they organized the ministry under the name of St. Nino.

In early January 2000, representatives from the church went to meet some of the refugees and leave what they could—tea, chocolates, blankets, and clothes. They expected to make their contribution and leave it at that. But the Chechens, in their desperation, were insistent. When the leadership and laity of the church met face-to-face with the reality of such human suffering, to a person the initial reluctance to do more was overcome and they took account of what was needed. The list was long and overwhelming. As Malkhaz tells it:

Since we didn't have money to purchase these items, we needed to do some fundraising. This was my first fundraising effort on the internet...I write a letter to all my friends [throughout the world] asking for \$500 U.S. dollars to complete the purchases for everything we needed for the camp. That was Thursday. I go to my office on Friday and there [are pledges amounting to] \$15,000 U.S. dollars. The next week we had \$200,000 and within one month we had half a million U.S. dollars!

Needless to say, five hundred thousand dollars in private donations is an enormous sum of money! It's enough to make a believer out of anyone!

So, what did Peace Cathedral do with this sudden largesse?

Something very visionary and astute. Aside from the immediate need for supplies, they also funded the construction of a center that would house, feed, educate, and support refugees over the long haul—many of whom would have had no other recourse in life.

The Beteli Center (“Beteli” being the Georgian translation of “Bethel”—meaning, “House of God”) has become the principal operational facility for the Evangelical Christian-Baptists of Georgia to carry out their ministry to people in need. It is one of the few non-governmental agencies in Georgia with which the United Nations Refugee program cooperates. Since its opening in 2003, the center has been expanded twice, as the people served now extend beyond refugees to include Georgians suffering

hardship, regardless of religious identity, as well as their own churches. Programs include language classes, computer training, early child education, a school of iconography and art, business education, carpentry shop, St. Luke's chapel, and a retreat center, as well as emergency shelter and food services for those in need. From 2003-2006, the Beteli Center even hosted the School of Elijah, a seminary to train students for pastoral and social ministry. They have taken the gifts of charity they received, multiplied their effectiveness, and expressed their appreciation in a prodigious and enduring way. For from that single effort eighteen years ago, they now count a myriad of lives that have been impacted and blessed by their ministries, which is an example of remarkably productive gratitude!

Typically, "productive" is not a term we associate with gratitude. In terms of charity or kindness, the normal custom is for it to be a single transaction—a giver and a receiver with a one-time gift. That is what Malkhaz and Peace Cathedral members initially envisioned; their benefactors were responding with charity to a specific need and leaving it at that. Once and done; there was little commitment to go much beyond that.

However, in the generous spirit of merciful love, their single call for charity mushroomed into a significant set of ministries where their own story now has been permanently rewritten. Not only has the Beteli Center become an incredible resource to their churches, in the process they have built extraordinary bonds with the Muslim communities within Chechnya and particularly Georgia, earning trust and positioning themselves to positively shape the character of their society.

Granted, some could argue they could have used the funds in other ways, perhaps doing capital improvements on their own building (which

they're doing at present) or investing the money into a trust fund to better endow their financial future. Many churches do this. In other words, Peace Cathedral could have simply kept the funds to serve their own interests and needs. But, instead, they committed it to bettering people's lives (including that of their enemies) in a way that has given the Evangelical Christian-Baptist churches of Georgia greater purpose, moral integrity, and spiritual relevance.

We often hear the expression, "to pay it forward," which may a good way to characterize what the response to charity of any type should be. Instead of returning favors or being indebted to a charitable heart, a more productive response would be to turn one's gratitude into another good deed for someone else. In that way, the circle of sharing goes beyond what is provided in a single transaction between a giver and receiver. "Paying it forward" is productive gratitude, insofar as it not only expresses sincere appreciation for what one has received, but then continues the spirit of generosity by doing the same for another. It expands the realm of generosity and sharing. If it's done continuously and exponentially, it has the potential of reaching every person on the planet with a spirit of mercy and care. One who receives a blessing expresses their gratitude by blessing another. That's productive gratitude!

This is the lens through which I interpret the parable of the talents, as it seems to make the most sense. In all likelihood, whenever you've pondered this story from Jesus, the first thought that popped into your head was about wisely using one's own skills and talents, along the lines of "use them or lose them." The servant who employed her talent well benefitted by the expansion of possibilities and opportunities in her life, whereas the one who "buried" his talent simply wasted it. Many preachers

like to spin the story in this way to encourage parishioners to contribute their talents and skills to the church's ministries.

However, that's not really what the story is about. A "talent" was the largest denomination of currency within the Semitic world (*talenta/talenton*, being the Greek term for it). I'm told each talent weighed between 60 and 80 pounds, which depending on the precious metal (gold, silver, or copper) would determine its value. Minimally, in Jesus' day, it would have been worth 6,000 denarii (a denarius being a daily wage). So, a single talent would be worth 6,000 times the daily wage (imagine your daily income and do the math!). Very, very few people had access to (or had even seen) a talent. To say the least, it wasn't pocket change!

So, what does this parable mean? Well, the first one received five talents (worth at least 30,000 denarii or 82 years of daily income!), the second got two (worth 12,000 denarii), and the third was given one talent; all three were entrusted with it while their master went away. During this time, the first one traded and doubled the original value, as did the second one. The third one, however, buried the talent—in other words, did nothing with it. When the master returned, he took account of each. The first one now had ten talents (60,000 denarii or 164 years of daily income!), the second had four talents (24,000 denarii), while the third returned the original amount. The master was livid with the one who did nothing and was completely unproductive and fruitless with the sum entrusted to him, while the other two were rewarded for what they had done.

When the parable is viewed in this light, it makes more sense. When God blesses us in life, the intent is for us to be productive with it—to increase the value of the blessing we receive by sharing and extending it

forward in a way that blesses others. If our gratitude simply ends with a single transaction, where the only one who benefits is ourselves, then it really doesn't amount to much. The gift isn't dynamic and growing. But if we take what we've been blessed with and pass it forward with generosity toward others, it becomes productive and magnanimous.

This is something to consider when we count our blessings at Thanksgiving. Instead of glibly citing all the good things that have come your way, think about the ways you've passed it forward (or should have passed it forward, as the case may be). Examine the manner in which blessings and gratitude multiply when they flow through you instead of merely focusing on what comes to you. If you receive a gift at any time, immediately imagine ways you can double its value by passing it forward to magnify the spirit of generosity and goodwill. For when this occurs, you realize how many more blessings you can account for in life!

As a congregation, we will recognize this more intentionally in 2018 as we celebrate our 175th anniversary as a church. Beginning on the first Sunday in January, we will launch a year-long effort to identify at least 175 people associated with this congregation who are passing it forward in some form of charitable service to others. We will express our gratitude for this church by noting the ways in which we contribute to making our world a better place. I, for one, am eager to discover all the various expressions of charity and service flowing forward from this congregation—all as a witness to our gratitude to God and the productive ways we express it. By next Thanksgiving, I anticipate we will be surprised by what the Spirit of God inspires us to do over the course of a calendar year, individually and collectively. For that will be a testament of our productive gratitude and a celebration of the amazing things we can do as a church.

Remember, God is always more generous with us than we realize or anticipate. I firmly believe when we count our blessings we will see far more whenever we pass them forward. For when they aren't—when we receive but are not generous with others, we sever the spiritual network divinely intended to exponentially magnify until all of humanity senses the compassion and merciful sharing that this world needs and heaven desires.

The good people of Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi, Georgia seem to grasp this, and I believe on many levels here, we do as well. With our parallel anniversary celebrations, the true account of our respective legacies as communities in Christ comes from the hearts of those who received our gifts and then passed on to others the mercies God bestows.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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