

**“Orthodox Generosity”**  
**Mark 4:1-20 and Miss Rumphius**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 23, 2016**

On facebook this week I came across a video from a Toronto ad agency featuring Canadians concerned about our elections. “As you’re thinking about your future,” they say, “we just want you to know that you guys are great.”<sup>1</sup> Reaching into our past the Canadians offer examples they believe set us apart – from our diversity to the birth of the disability rights movement, to bluegrass and jazz.

The video brought to mind an essay from the novelist Marilynne Robinson, better known for her novel *Gilead*. “There is clearly a feeling abroad,” she wrote, “that God smiled on our beginnings, and that we should return to them as we can.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a sentiment that always makes me a little nervous since I’ve not always convinced that going backward in American history is going to be good for everybody. But Robinson is convinced. “If we really did attempt to return to [our beginnings],” she writes, “we’d find Moses as well as Christ, [Protestant Reformer] John Calvin and his legions of intellectual heirs.” It’s shocking thing to hear from a liberal intellectual since Calvin is more often blamed by academics, not praised by them.

“The Lord commands us to do ‘good unto all men,’ universally” even though a great deal of people are undeserving, she quotes from Calvin’s writings.<sup>3</sup> We must do so, Calvin said, not because of anyone’s intrinsic character, but because of the image of God present in everyone.

Robinson carefully traces this divine requirement of generosity toward others through the birth and early years of our nation – from Winthrop’s famous “A Modell of Christian Charity” addressed to Puritans in 1630 to Jonathan Edwards’ sermon on “Christian Charity.” Like Calvin, Winthrop and Edwards read the law of Moses<sup>4</sup> to require that generosity be extended to more than just people who are deserving, or people of the same religion, or people of the same tribe. “Our enemies,” Edwards wrote, “those that abuse us and injure us, are our neighbors and therefore come under the rule of loving our neighbors as ourselves.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/10/17/leave-it-to-canada-to-remind-america-that-its-still-a-great-country/>

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, “Open Thy Hand Wide: Moses and the Origins of American Liberalism,” *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2012, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically Deuteronomy chapter 15.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity; Or, the Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced” quoted in Robinson, “Open Thy Hand Wide,” p. 81. Anticipating charges of paternalism, Robinson notes that the Tyndale Bible, appearing several centuries prior to Edwards, substitutes the word “love” for “charity” everywhere it appears in the New Testament.

If Marilynne Robinson is right, then there is a great deal more at stake in this upcoming election than conventions of decorum, fitness for leadership, or whose tax plan is going to help the middle class. The values that are the oxygen of self-government - respect for neighbors, hospitality toward the stranger, and liberation for the oppressed - these foundational values are being threatened at their root. The assertion that all human beings are created equal - that faith statement at the core of American self-government - is being challenged once again. And the vote - that little piece of nonviolence that we all embrace in the hope of solving disagreements without bloodshed - seems more precarious than it's ever been in any of our lifetimes.

If you go back to the beginning, according to Robinson, you'll find Christ there teaching about Good Samaritans; imploring us to love our enemies, not destroy them; requiring us to extend bread and justice not just to our kin, but to strangers, and widows, and orphans, too.

And maybe the loss of those values fits well with the parable that Jesus is teaching today. Those seeds don't always produce. Those seeds don't always take root. Some fall where the birds can easily pick them up, on the rocky ground, and among the thorns. The Word doesn't always take. It pretty much explains the world today - everything from terrorism to xenophobia, to secularism to white supremacy. The word doesn't always take root.

Maybe that's what's happening to our nation. The word just isn't taking root. That word of generosity that birth America however imperfectly, that led to a nation of immigrants, that led suffragists to claim their right to vote, that slaves and abolitionists trumpeted to secure their freedom and civil rights marchers claimed again to bring down Jim Crow. Maybe the word isn't taking root like it has before. Maybe the church is lacking in our own good soil. Maybe we've allowed the thorns - cares of the world, and the lure of wealth - to choke the seed that God gave us. That's one way to read this parable - as explanation for why things fall apart, why the social fabric is fraying in more than just its edges. That's one way to read Jesus' words - as *explanation for everything that is wrong about us and our world*.

If that's true then I don't have much more to offer you this morning than anything already offered by newspaper columnists, and political commentators. I don't have much more to offer than secular essayists and TV pundits. That's what they all seem to be saying - democracy is fragile. Shared power requires more than just treasured documents - it requires citizen trust which is hard to come by on the right and the left. If all Jesus offers us this morning is an explanation for how it is that our world falls apart, then maybe we should have stayed home.

But Jesus says this is the parable of the *sower*, not the parable of the *soil*. And this sower scatters seed recklessly, without regard to the condition of the soil. Seed goes everywhere. Gardeners that I know scatter seed with a little more precision. They scatter the seed where it's likely to grow. But not this one. This sower chooses to scatter the word all over the place, sowing the word everywhere. It's almost as though the sower isn't willing to give up on soil that she knows isn't likely to produce any results. The sower isn't willing to let go of the possibility that the word will work it's way into soil that we've decided has no chance of bearing fruit. It's a generosity that borders on the ridiculous.

And maybe that's the kind of generosity that we must relearn especially when the soil of our nation seems so inhospitable to receiving that kind of message. Scatter the word of do unto Syrian refugees and Muslims and political opponents as you would have them do unto you liberally even when you know the soil isn't going to receive it. Scatter the word of hope for immigrants and black lives that don't matter as they must, generously even when you know hope won't give you a return in the marketplace or at the ballot box. Scatter the word that all human beings bear the image of God regardless of their color or their Party or their zip code all over the place even when you know that word isn't likely to take root.

"As God bestowed his benefits on us," Calvin said in a sermon on Deuteronomy 15, "let us beware that we acknowledge it towards him, by doing good to our neighbors whom he offered unto us, so as we neither exempt ourselves from their want, nor seclude them from our abundance, but gently make them partakers with us, as folk that are linked together in an inseparable bond."<sup>6</sup>

Scatter the seed recklessly knowing that stinginess and fear are not what lie in the heart of God and they won't lead us anywhere. Walls that we put up around our hearts or our land cannot reflect the grace of a generous God. And I know that this kind of generosity sounds terribly naïve at a time when people are petrified about terrorist attacks and stagnant wages and dangerous people who might filter in through the borders. But as one of the nation's leading sociologists pointed out recently, "most Americans are living in the safest place at the safest time in human history."<sup>7</sup> *The Atlantic* proclaimed 2015 "the best year in history for the average human being." On balance, the world hasn't gotten more dangerous. It's certainly not more dangerous for us than it was for Jesus, or Calvin, or Winthrop, or Edwards. The world hasn't become more dangerous for most of us. We've just become more fearful.

And when has fear ever led our nation to a good decision? When has fear ever led the church to a good decision? When has fear ever led you to a good decision?

Miss Rumphius won the national book award in 1983.<sup>8</sup> I love that the heroine in this story is an unmarried woman who finds her calling late in life. It reminds us that God's seed can bear fruit at any time, and wisdom does not always come from what is new. Sometimes we need to look to our past to find our future. No one is too old to receive or fulfill a call from God. And most of all, we find that calling only when we're sharing something with the world, making the world a more beautiful place.

The book is dedicated to Saint Nicholas, patron saint of children, and sailors, and maidens. There are lots of legends about old Saint Nick, but one that carries the most historical probability is an incident involving 3 poor maidens who could not afford a proper dowry, leaving them, according to the time, vulnerable to poverty or

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin quoted in Robinson, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Glasner, President of Lewis and Clark College quoted in "Why We're Living in An Age of Fear," *Rolling Stone*, Neil Strauss, October 6, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/why-were-living-in-the-age-of-fear-w443554>

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Cooney, *Miss Rumphius*, (New York: Viking Books), 1982.

exploitation. In secret, Saint Nicholas goes to the house of the 3 maidens, under the cover of night. Taking three purses of gold, he tosses them through the window of the house, one for each maiden.

Surprisingly, Saint Nick is remembered both for his excessive generosity and as the defender of orthodoxy - for defending the faith. A shocking thing to hear since orthodoxy and generosity seldom join hands in the same sentence.

But maybe in these perilous times, orthodoxy – which translate “correct thought or practice” – is exactly what needs defending. Not orthodoxy around the size or role of government, or educational or tax policy. Not orthodoxy around the role of government programs vs. the role of the private sector. These are all legitimate questions for people to debate, for parties to advocate, and for Republicans and Democrats, and Greens and Socialists and Libertarians to argue over in good faith.

No, what needs defending, and what the church must defend with its life is the doctrine of generosity – of openhandedness that we find at our beginnings. The doctrine of generosity demanded by the law of Moses and the law of Christ. Doctrine that announces “there, but for the grace of God, go I.” Doctrine that demands hospitality to strangers as first and foremost a privilege not a burden because some have entertained angels in doing so. Doctrine that warns individuals and nations that building bigger barns, or stepping over poor men at the gate, or protecting our own as our first and greatest value is the best way to lose ourselves and the world that leads to greater safety for everyone.

And listen, if Jesus’ parable is true, then I won’t be discouraged that a whole lot of that seed doesn’t take root. A whole lot of people may never understand how it is that generosity to immigrants leads to a better world for everyone. A lot of people may never accept that loving your neighbors is safer for you than fearing them. A lot of people may never believe that we human beings are linked together in an inseparable bond even though God has said it is true. But it won’t matter, because the kind of generosity that Jesus is sowing doesn’t need much of a plot to take root.

The seeds that God is planting – seeds of hope, seeds of joy, seeds of love – when those seeds take root – seeds of justice and liberation and peace - they bring forth grain yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold! Let anyone with ears listen!