

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
The Fearful Investors
November 16, 2008

Magic Penny

Words & Music by Malvina Reynolds (1955)

Love is something if you give it away,
Give it away,
Give it away,
Love is something if you give it away,
You end up having more.

It's just like a magic penny:
Hold it tight and you won't have any;
Lend it, spend it and you'll have so many,
They'll roll all over the floor.
For —

Love is something if you give it away,
Give it away,
Give it away,
Love is something if you give it away,
You end up having more.

The Fearful Investors
by Donne Hayden

Here is the beginning of an article that ran in the May 19, 2006 issue of *The Clovis New Journal* in my hometown of Clovis, New Mexico.

They say they are passing through the area spreading Jesus' message of love. Their self-described progressive views on Christianity, however, are not embraced by everyone.

Six primary walkers of CrossWalk America began their four-month journey in Arizona and plan to end in Washington, D.C., where they will hold a rally to "nail their affirmations to the doorway of America." The 2,500-mile trek is symbolic of the walking Jesus did during his three years of ministry. Members of the group, who are encouraging volunteers to join them, arrived Thursday in Clovis and plan to remain in town through Sunday.¹

To refresh your memory, let me summarize the "self-described progressive views on Christianity" of the Crosswalk America folks:

¹ Tonya Garner, " 'Progressive' Christians Spread Message in Clovis," *Clovis News Journal*, May 19, 2006.

“ . . . we pledge ourselves completely to the way of Love. We work to express our love, as Jesus teaches us, in three ways: by loving God, neighbor, and self.” The way of Love includes 1) following the “path of Jesus, without denying legitimacy of other paths,” 2) “studying ancient testimonies which we call Scripture” [but which other peoples may call something else, like the Koran or the 8-Fold Path]; 3) celebrating the God reflected in creation, “in the earth and its ecosystems, the sacred and secular, Christian and non-Christian, human and non-human”; 4) expressing love in “sincere, vibrant and artful” worship; 5) valuing and interacting with all people, “regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class”; 6) taking the part of “the outcast and oppressed,” those who are scorned and afflicted [like drug addicts, homosexuals, and illegal aliens, perhaps?], and seeking peace and justice whether or not those around us do; 7) protecting religious freedom by “resisting the commingling of church and state”; 8) remaining humble, “acknowledging our own shortcomings” at the same time we seek “to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies”; 9) “basing our lives on the faith” acquired through Jesus’ teachings that “we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination—for eternity”—[in other words, God is Love or Love is God, whichever you prefer]; 10) “recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth”; 11) recognizing the physical and spiritual “benefits of reflection, worship and recreation in addition to work”; and finally, 12) “Acting on the faith that we are born with a meaning and purpose” which includes “a vocation to strengthen and extend God's realm of love.”

These affirmations express to large extent my own understanding of the *original* message of Christianity—the one taught by Jesus, not the theologians who came later. If

we are, as Jesus instructed, to love even those who mean us harm—our “enemies,” who then should we not love? Jesus’ teachings often occur in the form of parables, and the encounter between the progressive Christians of CrossWalk America and the conservative Christians of my hometown, Clovis, New Mexico, seem to me a perfect illustration of the message in the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, Verses 14-28 (NRSV):

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents[a talent of silver = 6000 drachmas, i.e., lots of money], to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. . . . And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. . . .

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.”²

Keeping in mind that all of Jesus’ parables relate somehow to understanding the “Kingdom of God” or the “Kingdom of Heaven,” let’s identify the “valuables” in this puzzling parable, not as money and goods, but as the riches of love and compassion.

² Jesus Seminar scholars rated this parable “Pink” meaning they believe Jesus said this or something very like it. (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar in *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 255-256.

In the language of 2000 years ago in Israel, we have an owner, a Master, someone rich in Love, who decides to entrust it to those who serve him while he goes away for a while. He gives them different amounts, “to each according to his ability.” Again, think in terms of compassionate love, not financial investment skills. This implies that some are naturally loving and compassionate; others are *capable* of love and compassion though it may not come quite so easily; and some find it difficult to be loving and compassionate.

Those who are naturally loving and compassionate (like the slave who received five talents or lots of money) know that investing an asset, putting it to work, will likely result in growth, “doubling the investment.” The second kind of person, somewhat loving and compassionate, also recognizes that “love isn’t love until you give it away.” But the person who finds it difficult to feel love and compassion for others, like the fearful slave, tries to protect what little love he has, which he constantly fears to lose. Poor fellow.

In these difficult economic times, we can, perhaps, sympathize with his impulse to dig a hole and bury the money; some of us have considered withdrawing our money from the bank and hiding it in the mattress rather than risk leaving it in collapsing banks. But this parable is not about earthly economy or material wealth; it is about currency and investment in the Kingdom of God.

When the Master asks what the servants have done with his valuable assets, each reports the way he handled them. The Master is pleased that the first two servants have put the assets to work and increased them, but he is disappointed with the fearful servant who merely held on to the initial amount he was given. In the response of the Master, the message is clear that it is better to use these particular valuable assets (i.e.,

love and compassion) than to hoard them. Likewise, when we love and do good—not only to friends and family but also to strangers, to those less fortunate, and to those who mean us harm—we are investing the currency of love and compassion in ways that result in great profits.

The fearful servant's response in the parable is intriguing. "Master," he says, "I know that you drive a hard bargain, reaping where you didn't sow and gathering where you didn't scatter." This reference to the Master "driving a hard bargain" seems to me a reference to the teachings of Jesus—perhaps especially to "Love your enemy" – Now **that's** a hard bargain. Then the timid servant comments that the Master reaps "what he did not sow" and gathers "where he did not scatter," and the Master acknowledges this in his response. Doesn't this suggest that love can be found in places where the Master hasn't spread his message? Does it not imply that *wherever* love and compassion are found, they are assets that can be gathered in and added to the overall profit of humankind?

Finally, the timid servant explains that because he was afraid, he buried the money to keep it safe, and now is returning it to its owner. Afraid? Afraid of what? Afraid there's not enough? Afraid only a limited amount is available? Afraid of losing what little the Master had entrusted to him? So his response is to bury it, hide it, not use it, and certainly not share it. If we apply this tendency to hide and hoard love and compassion, we have the response of many today who identify themselves as Christians, such as those in Clovis, New Mexico, whose attitude toward love and compassion was that of the fearful servant in the parable. Again from the *Clovis News Journal*, here is what happened:

Walk co-president Eric Elnes said the team relies on the hospitality of local churches along the route to provide warm beds and meals. But when CrossWalk officials approached the Clovis Ministerial Alliance via e-mail, Elnes said the response was less than welcoming. Clovis Christian Ministerial Alliance Chairman Lance Clemmons, a Presbyterian minister, was the recipient of the CrossWalk e-mail.

In return correspondence, Clemmons thanked the group for the invitation to assist the project but said he was unaware of any churches in the Clovis area that followed “progressive theology.”³

Reverend Clemmons told them they would not be welcome at any church in Clovis and suggested they look for some other community in which to find hospitality, since in this community of over 36,000 people, none would be forthcoming. The walkers really had no choice, given how far-between towns are in eastern New Mexico. Besides, Reverend Clemmons was wrong as it turned out. One of the walkers, Reverend Eric Elnes of the Congregationalist Church of Christ in Scottsdale, Arizona, wrote in a blog entry in late May:

We even eventually found a church that welcomed us warmly: the Llano Estacado⁴ Metropolitan Community Church. They themselves have been snubbed by many churches in the community because most of their membership is gay. Last night, our hostess, Sister Ellen, told us how thrilled she was that, after experiencing such ostracism by many in the community, CrossWalk America would choose to spend time with them. We told her that we felt the same way, in reverse. WE were thrilled that, after being snubbed by many in the community, their church would choose to spend time with us!

I wondered if this reciprocal appreciation may have been at the root of many gatherings Jesus and his disciples were a part of. He met so often with the marginalized in the communities he visited. He and his disciples were probably as appreciative as those he visited over welcome and hospitality being extended.⁵

The walkers stayed in Clovis for several days and, according to the documentary filmmaker traveling with the group, in spite of being turned away by the religious

³ Tonya Garner

⁴ “Llano Estacado” or “Staked Plains” is the name given by the earliest explorers from Spain to the plains of eastern New Mexico and west Texas. The land is so flat and treeless, the Spaniards had to drive stakes in the ground so they would know when they had traveled in a circle.

⁵ Eric Elnes, blog.

establishment, various community members welcomed CrossWalk with open arms in the form of:

- + Llano Estacado Metropolitan Community Church
- + The public school where Meighan and Chris were asked to speak to three different classes about commitment
- + The Baptist minister who shared his story and his art with us at the coffee house
- + Two radio stations that interviewed Eric and Rebecca and promoted the mission of CrossWalk – including KIJN Jesus Radio, a conservative Christian station.
- + Mike Gardell’s radio sermon about CrossWalk America today on KIJN Jesus Radio
- + Tonya Garner of the *Clovis News Journal* who placed the story about CrossWalk on the cover
- + All the people who honked and waved – particularly after the article ran

Whatever love or compassion fearful Christians may feel, they seem to reserve it for those they approve of, those they don’t fear. These fearful investors lock away what little love they have—it doesn’t grow and expand, it doesn’t profit them or anyone else. They are afraid of the Source of that love, apparently believing it to be a stingy and demanding God. But according to the teachings of Jesus, the Source of Love gives us all the love we can possibly hold and more. The message in the parable of the talents is that God prefers that we take risks with love and compassion. Hoarding is not a profitable use of those assets—only in *spending love*, freely, generously and inclusively, can we increase the overall supply of love and compassion. “Love is something, if you give it away, you end up having more.”