

Participate

I was 12 years old when the original version of The Poseidon Adventure movie came out in 1972. The cast of this movie read like a Hollywood “who’s who” of that era: Shelley Winters, Roddy McDowell, Carol Lindley, Ernest Borgnine, Red Buttons, Jack Albertson, Pamela Sue Martin. All of these actors played remarkable parts in my 12-year old estimation, but none of them compared to the character Reverend Frank Scott played by movie legend Gene Hackman. I was fascinated with how Hackman portrayed this preacher as a strong leader in imminent crisis. The storyline was of an old ship named “The Poseidon” that makes a New Year’s voyage from New York heading for Greece. Along the way a massive storm turns the ship over leaving the survivors dealing with an upside-down ship trying to find their way to the highest point so they can be rescued. Gene Hackman’s character, Reverend Frank Scott, becomes the de facto leader of a motley band of survivors who’ve figured out where on the ship’s bottom they need to climb UP to. Along the way, some of them suffer tragic deaths and don’t make it to the end. Reverend Frank Scott valiantly grieves each of the deaths and comforts the mourners while always rallying them to “carry on” toward their goal.

In the final scene, immediately after another of them meets their untimely death, Reverend Frank Scott takes it on himself to make the final leap for the good of the remnant. There's a valve that needs to be turned to cut off a deadly spray of steam that is blocking their passage to safety. So he dangles himself on this valve wheel, suspended over a fiery abyss—everyone knows that, if he succeeds, he himself won't make it. While he is slowly, successfully turning the valve wheel, he talks to God. And he uses some incredibly salty language that I as a church-going 12 year old was quite shocked to hear. "What more do you want of us?"...he says. "We've come all this way, no thanks to you. We did on our own no help from you. We didn't ask you to fight for us but d*n it, don't fight against us!" (There he used the "d"word—you know, the 4-letter word beginning with a "d" and ending with an "n.") "Leave us alone! How many more sacrifices? How much more blood? How many more lives?You want another life? Then take me!" and with that, having successfully closing the valve enabling safe passage for those still there, he loses his grip and disappears in the steaming fiery abyss below.**

This scene of a preacher angry and cussing at God scandalized me. It confronted me with a reality I hadn't previously considered, that serving God, especially as a minister (I mean I thought being a minister meant you lived a charmed life), didn't necessarily mean earning a comfortable life—so much so that you could actually find yourself cussing at God! I WAS 12, after all.

Reverend Frank Scott's imperiled question of basically, "What do you want from us God?" is what our Gospel lesson of the Parable of the Talents presents. Like all Parables, it's not all that helpful to think of the one ordering punishment on the reprobates as God. Parables use symbolic and colorful language to get at "our" experiences. So in this parable the property-owner who goes on a journey isn't some deistic version of an absentee God, it's simply a character that exemplifies how we humans may experience God. In the parable the servant who just sat on his gift experiences an unmerciful reception at the end. And our experience of God may be that we are being punished but that doesn't necessarily make that an attribute of God. Any punishment we may experience as a result of disobedience is ALWAYS self-inflicted. What did the servants who invested the master's money wisely

receive? They received the experience of joy and eternal happiness.

So it may seem obvious, although Reverend Frank Scott might not agree--“What more do you want from us God?” Okay I’ll tell you. What god wants, for us and for our lives, in a single word, is our “participation.” Think about what it is that YOU want! Do you want to experience love and feel loved?—Participate! Do you want that rush of being “on top of things?”—Participate! Do you want to get out of the dead-end reality of always feeling like a victim out there in life?—Participate! Do you get discouraged that you always seem to “get it wrong?”—Participate! Do you want to get a leg up on those forces out to “get” you?—Participate! One way of responding to life’s exigencies is to live in fear of what’s going to happen TO us, but that’s simply not useful and non-participatory. How ARE we going to experience our days as joy and happiness—there’s only one way—Participate! Well, to a large extent, you’re almost doing that simply by being HERE today. I don’t know what Reverend Frank Scott’s church was like, but this church?—The Episcopal Church of the Nativity? This church offers everyone who’ll darken its doors the opportunity to participate in the good that God is doing in the world.

When I heard Gene Hackman's Reverend Frank Scott cuss and swear at God I had no idea at the time that I would be wearing this collar referencing him in a sermon of my own that I would be preaching 45 years later. My being scandalized at this Reverend's irreverence didn't nip my journey in the church even though it easily could have. I grew up Baptist, as many of you know, and I never stopped going to church even though I wished I could many times. But just going to church—showing up at church—never felt like participation. I never felt like I was fully participating until I started giving regularly of my income, meager as it was, to the ministries of the church. I struggled with giving to the church for years and years. In the Baptist church they didn't talk about pledging so much as "tithing." "Tithing", we were taught, was a slice off the top—it was the act of giving ten percent of your income to God through offerings to the church. And I struggled with that when I was a working college student and then later when I took on low-paying jobs here and there. I can remember making my pledge and then not meeting my pledge and being afraid God was gonna get me for not fulfilling my commitment. I can remember being behind on my pledge in December and using all my Christmas cash gifts to miraculously meet my pledge.

But it always felt like a struggle—until one day I heard a stewardship campaign speech that really made sense to me. They recommended that if you can't start with a tithe, you can certainly work up to it and beyond it if you really take it seriously. So I started where I could start and then year after year I would increase my pledge by ten percent each year. Once I committed myself to this program of increasing year over year, I started to feel like I was fully participating. Now, I know that many of our members here do much better than a tithe—a tithe, after all, is only ten percent. But for others a tithe might sound a bit steep and to you I say this, “If you really want to feel like you're participating, start wherever you can start.” And then increase it by ten percent each year as you confidently claim your share in what God is doing in the world.

“What do you want from us God?” God doesn't want our money. God wants our participation; and the church provides that opportunity on an ongoing basis. No, I don't think God will punish me (or you) for not “participating.” What the parable of the talents tells us is that when it comes to our experience of life, whether or not we will feel the joy of Our Lord, it certainly is not

random, but totally within the realm of our decision-making.

The degree to which WE participate is up to us. You see, God has already demonstrated to us that He is all in on this one. That's what the cross was all about—God demonstrating his love for us to the point that he would die for us. So God is already there. We can't buy God's good will—we can't buy God's love for us—that's already freely given. The question only is whether we want to participate in the experience of grace, which IS a life of transformation and victory. The way has been paved; the path has been cleared. Our access to being rescued is open. We triumphantly come through the perilous upside –down adventure of this life to the light and salvation, which only God can provide. It's time for your Adventure of the blessings of eternal life—its' time for your Eternal Adventure—let it begin in your act to fully participate in the Divine. To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.