

Generosity as Justice
1 Timothy 6:17-19
Luke 12:13-21
November 15, 2009

Last Spring I attended the five-day Festival of Homiletics held in Atlanta. Among the many incredibly gifted speakers, was Tom Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. He spoke on the difficulty of preaching about money during hard financial times and he began with this story: A letter was written to Dear Abby that said, "Dear Abby, I want to talk to my boyfriend about sharing expenses now that we're living together. I think he should pay for half the cost of my birth control pills. But I don't know how to broach the subject; I don't know him well enough to talk to him about money." Long went on to say that we'll talk at length on just about anything in today's world—on talk shows, on Facebook, on Twitter, on YouTube, but money – well, we don't know each other well enough to talk about money. We feel free to ask each other all kinds of intimate questions, but one question is taboo in polite society: "How much do you make?" This question is taboo, not because it is a trivial question, but because it is so incredibly important to us because in our society, how much we make is to many a sign of how valuable we are.

Our gospel text for today comes from Luke because of all of the gospel writers Luke is the most concerned with economic justice, with what we do with our money that is so tied into our sense of self-worth. From the beginning with Mary's Magnificat when Mary sings, not a lullaby, but a song of victory, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Lk. 1:52-53) to the end of that gospel in the story about the walk to Emmaus, where Jesus is made known in the breaking and the sharing of the bread with strangers he meets along the road, Luke is focused on the importance of sharing and of giving what we have for the benefit of others. He includes in his Sermon on the Plain, not only blessings, but also woes. "Blessed are the poor" is set starkly against "Woe to you rich." In Luke, self-worth comes from giving our money away, not from accumulating it!

Now some have called Luke a "socialist," but his economics are more complicated than that, and Jesus' parables and the various ways Jesus treats those with wealth, signal a complex economic ethic. On the one hand he tells the rich young ruler to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, but he is satisfied, and indeed gives his blessing, to Zaccheus the tax collector, who offers to give back half of what he has unscrupulously taken from the people, saying "Today, salvation has come to this house."

In today's reading, a rich person is experiencing a crisis – he has too much stuff and not enough barns to hold it! In an age before mini-warehouses were created, he has to decide what to do with his excess. And he comes up with a brilliant idea – he'll build his own mini-warehouses – more barns! And then he'll give himself a party to celebrate his cleverness, his wealth and his self-sufficiency. But unbeknownst to him, his life is drawing quickly to an end, and all of the things he has so carefully hoarded for his future, will belong ultimately to others. He doesn't have a clue!

As you may know, I've been driving up and down Hwy.316 for the last several weeks, spending two days in Atlanta so that I can have the pleasure of participating in the care of my grandson on Mondays and Tuesdays while his mother and dad go off to work. Some say this time spent on the road must be a quite a burden, but on the contrary – it is about three hours of quiet time, time to think, to pray, and to learn. For some of these hours, I've listened to the choir Christmas cantata practice CD, and to books, thanks to Jonathan and Edwina's sharing, and recently I've also listened to CDs from all of these wonderful workshops and seminars I've gone

to in the past. In addition to Tom Long, this past week, I heard again the booming, prophetic voice of Walter Brueggemann. And it was was serendipity! What I heard is so helpful in understanding this parable of, what is now commonly referred to as “the rich fool.”

Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, reflects on the history of Israel. Powerless and oppressed, enslaved in Egypt, Israel called out to the Lord, and was rescued. Fleeing into Egypt with only the clothes on their backs, and bread baked so fast that it didn’t have time to rise, they were faced quickly with hunger and thirst. And God provided for them manna, quail, and water – miraculous gifts in a desert wasteland. But when they arrived in the Promised Land, those miraculous gifts ceased because they were now in a land of milk and honey – not a land, mind you, that they had created from nothing, but a land that already possessed great resources, now given to them to use wisely and gratefully. But, Brueggemann notes, abundance unfortunately produces amnesia. And in the midst of their bounty, becoming quickly used to it, the Israelites soon forgot how to sing, “Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow.” And like our rich fool from today’s reading, who ignored the fact that it was the land that had produced his great harvest, they began to think all that they had was completely of their own doing.

But it didn’t stop there – their amnesia led to arrogance. They felt they deserved all that they had; they were special; they were better than others; and so they built great buildings and a huge temple for God to sit ensconced (Brueggemann would say “imprisoned”!). They no longer asked, “What would God have me to do,” but instead assumed that God would bless whatever it was they were doing. Prophets, of course, arose in that arrogant and selfish culture to warn the people – God does not like your sacrifice, this mindless, heartless, ritualized routine, Isaiah saying “You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers . . . you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” (Isa. 58:3b-4a)

Similarly, the rich fool, who very well may have attended services at the Temple regularly, set about to keep all that he’d amassed for himself, forgetting the original commandment God had given his ancestors, “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house” . . . to cover the naked, and not hide yourself from your own kin. (Isa. 58:6-7).

Ah, if it only stopped there, with arrogance, but Brueggemann relentlessly pushes on, and by the time I’d gotten to Sugarloaf Parkway, he was saying that arrogance leads to alienation, and finally, alienation leads to annihilation. Israel, alienated from God and from those whom God is most concerned for, is finally destroyed, the Temple torn down, and the people subject to exile and captivity in Babylon.

Likewise, the rich fool, alienated from his community, alienated apparently even from his family, for he talks only to himself in this parable, gives himself a party – a party for one – can anything be more pathetic? He congratulates himself on his success, on the future that he has insured for himself through his accumulation of wealth, and decides to relax, eat, drink and be merry! All by himself. However, his isolation leads rapidly to his demise, God saying to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

Amnesia, arrogance, alienation, annihilation. (Thirty days to a more powerful vocabulary!!) Scary words – scary words for us individually as we assess where we are on the gratitude scale, how aware we are of the source of our blessings or do we suffer from amnesia? How connected we are to those who have less and do we keep ourselves separate from them? How conscious are we to our own vulnerability; do we really think we can live forever and take it all with us?

These are scary words also for us as a society and as a country, as we seem more and more to bow down to the idols of progress, consumption, competition, and unaccountability. Where we would see progress and rapid expansion and accumulation of assets as a primary good,

the gospels ask “How quickly are you amassing and expanding good deeds?” Where we find satisfaction in our possessions and our material goods, holding up consumption as a civic duty and measuring our country’s success based on our buying power, the gospels ask “Where is your satisfaction from sharing and from gratefulness?” Where our culture assumes salvation comes through competition, for even the most fundamental and literal of Christians believe in some kind of social Darwinism which approves the survival of the industrious, hardworking, and task-oriented fittest, and condones the decline of the unfit, unprofitable, under-or unemployed weak because they are worth-less, the gospels ask, “Where is your sense of cooperation and of justice, since no one person is inherently more valuable than another, and all human beings are more alike than they are different, and all are equally loved in God’s sight?” Where industry is now globalized, and corporations are free from ties to a particular community or country so that maximum profit taking without even minimum accountability is often the norm, the gospels ask, “How might we find freedom in accountability to build up communities, and cooperation to strengthen our human and our natural resources?”¹

We do our little bit today to contribute towards God’s vision of a just and equitable community. By bringing our gifts to the altar today to help people working towards a GED certificate, that union card, that passport into a better job and wider opportunities, we are shaking off the amnesia that may have invaded our souls; we are acknowledging the source of all of our gifts, and our willingness to share them with our brothers and sisters, God’s other children. We are walking away from our arrogance in assuming that we’ve done it all on our own and are therefore more deserving than those others. In walking together towards this common altar, we are acknowledging our interdependence and our need for community, putting aside the alienation and isolation our busyness so often fosters. And, as we walk to this altar, and place our gifts there, we are celebrating that even though our lives may be finite, and our days on this earth limited, we can have a lasting effect on those who come after us; we can make an enduring mark on this world simply by helping someone else.

Someone has said, “Our money is always going to make a difference, the question is where?”² Do you want to throw yourself a solitary little party, or do you want to participate in a great big party, a banquet where everyone is invited and where there is room for all and more than enough to be shared. The choice is yours, you don’t have to tell me or anybody else about it. After all, you might think that we don’t know each other well enough to talk about money. But, I think we do.

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¹ See Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 189-224.

² Lauren Tyler Wright, *Giving, The Sacred Art* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2008), 116.