

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 15, 2006

THE LIFE GIVEN AWAY

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." *Mark 10:21*

Mark's arrangement of Jesus' teachings is a study in contrasts. Often in-your-face contrasts. Take today's reading. When people bring children to Jesus for him to bless them, the disciples, imagining that a busy man like Jesus has better things to do, tell the people to shove off and stop bothering him. But Jesus comes down on them like a hammer, as he's prone to do in Mark's gospel. "*Let them come to me!*" he insists. *You might just learn from them!* "Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in!" (Peterson, *The Message*).

If that teaching sounds a bit cryptic, the next event opens it up with more clarity than we, who have so much by the world's standard, might care for. Jesus is approached by a man, who's not short of material wealth, asking about the way into the kingdom of God. He's neither young, as in Matthew's version, nor a ruler, as in Luke's. Just a man—which makes him so representative of us. When Jesus asks him to come to God wholly, essentially with only the things he can take with him to the grave, he's despondent and leaves because he has, in the literal sense of the Greek, "many acquisitions." In our culture this doesn't make him a mogul. He just has a lot of stuff. How much that you can't part with is in your attic, basement or garage? Things accumulate in such places in proportion to the space available. We prove that in our household. I may never read Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* again, but knowing that it's on my shelf gives me a certain comfort.

The man is not vilified. Jesus' doesn't condemn him or us. On the contrary, you recall it says that after the man has answered the financial planner's Series 7 pinnacle question to perfection, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, 'You lack one thing . . .'" He wasn't a bad man, on the contrary. We can all identify with him. Still, he brings to mind a secret agent of Napoleon in Patrick O'Brian's historical novels, one Duhamel. Through a series of novels Duhamel and Stephen Maturin, an Irish/Catalan spy in the service of the King of England, pit their wits and craft against each other. But eventually Duhamel is worn down with despondency by Napoleon's insidious regime, and he crosses to the British side, revealing a pile of information for which he's paid handsomely in gold. He is a good man come to his senses, one might say. He makes plans to migrate from England to Canada, a beckoning promised land with many of his countrymen, and stepping from the tender to the ship that will take him there, his pockets groaning with gold, misses his step and sinks like a stone. "There are no pockets in a shroud," the Jews used to say.

If you would really find what your soul yearns for, "the kingdom of God," said Jesus, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor."

For many years we had a quotation on our refrigerator of Martin Luther from the 1500s. It read:

I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all.
But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess.

John Bunyan voiced the same sentiment:

There was a man, though some would count him mad,
The more he cast away, the more he had.

It's a compelling message in the gospel that will not let us go, Jesus' talking about giving up our lives, our property, our desires, in order to get them back newly shaped and focused, with a blessing. "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be given to you" (Luke 6:38). And, "Unless a grain of wheat fall to the earth and die, it remains alone" (John 12:24).

How do we get past what lies between us and God in our letting go of the stuff we have for the kingdom that we seek? How do we come to terms with that which feels beyond our capacity. Well, it isn't actually outside our experience. We've actually spent most of our lives trusting far beyond our own capacities or understanding. As an infant you didn't, I assume, refuse the nourishment that was offered because you didn't understand what was going on. You just embraced it. Nor as a child did you question the security or material benefits that came to you from your parents to make your life secure and pleasant. Admittedly, in high school you thought you knew everything, but college opened up a depth and range, for you, of the unexplored and unexplorable, because you had to choose your academic focus. Then, as an adult in the work place, one's own specialist knowledge sometimes leaves us awash in a mysterious sea as you discover and appreciate what others know of their fields. But you don't reject the mysteries that they are party to and you are not. You welcome their expertise when circumstance demands

it. Unless you happen to be an artist talking to an engineer—but that’s another story. So the mind and motives of God always expand away exponentially from whatever point of spiritual maturity we happen be in. God is always larger than our best ideas. That’s why the one in whom we live and move and have our being is called *God*. God will not be contained within our tame conventions. So, when God says “Let go, let me guide you through life’s choices,” and when God counsels that the life given away is the only truly blessed life,” we can trust God.

When two people stand here before God in a wedding, each promises God to give him or herself to the other as a priority. Each pledges to make the other their first obligation in love. There is a cost. Yet when that cost is equally shared, there is the blessing. You see that lady in the back far right of the choir loft? Ninety-five and still singing with an enviable soprano voice. Sixty years married, Tom and Kay, celebrating their diamond wedding this coming Wednesday. You know them well. There’s an answer for us of God’s goodness and wisdom at work as loud as a church wedding bell. If we do less than give ourselves completely—to God, each other, and our children, everyone is short changed, especially ourselves.

Giving is not just about doing a good thing. Doing a good thing for its own sake is a bit like throwing a sea anchor overboard when you’re sailing in a storm. A sea anchor is a sail or some other thing seized to a rope that will float and drag on your boat’s progress, thereby keeping the ship pointed downwind so it doesn’t broach too. Yet all it does is keep you running safely before the wind so you can feel good, temporarily. It doesn’t actually help you get where the compass tells you you need to be going. Good deeds without a compass heading, a moral direction toward the goal of God’s kingdom, are the same.

The question that is asked of Jesus by the man is not “What must I do to feel good?” We all know how empty those responses can feel—like a bite of cotton candy that explodes with sweetness and flavor in the mouth, but lasts about as long as a swindler’s promise. So we need another bite, and another.

Among the treasury of stories of the ancient rabbis is the story of the rich Jew who never gave alms to the poor or contributed to charitable causes. People in his small village never called him by name, they simply referred to him as The Miser.

One day a beggar came to the door of The Miser. “Where do you come from,” he asked.

“I live in the village,” answered the beggar.

“Nonsense,” cried The Miser. “Everyone in the village knows I don’t support beggars!”

In the same village there lived a poor shoemaker. He was a most generous man who responded to everyone in need and every charitable cause that was brought to his attention. No one was ever turned away empty-handed from his door.

One day The Miser died. The village leaders decided to bury him at the edge of the cemetery. No one mourned his passing; no one followed the rabbi to his funeral to the place of burial.

As the days passed, the rabbi heard disturbing news regarding the shoemaker. “He no longer gives alms to the beggars,” complained one man.

“He has refused every charity that has approached him,” declared another.

“Has anyone asked about his change?” inquired the rabbi.

“Yes,” replied the first man. “He says he no longer has money to give away.”

So the rabbi called on the shoemaker. “Why have you suddenly ceased giving money to worthy causes?” he asked.

Slowly the shoemaker began to speak. “Many years ago the man you called The Miser came to me with a huge sum of money and asked me to distribute it to beggars and charities. He made me promise that I would not reveal the source of the money until after he died. Once every month he would visit me secretly and give me additional money to distribute. I became known as the great benefactor, even though I never spent a penny of my own money. I’m surprised that no one questioned me earlier. How could anyone who had the wages of a shoemaker give away as much money as I have all these years?”

The rabbi called all the villagers together and told them the story. “The Miser has lived by the Scriptures, keeping his charity a secret,” the rabbi told them. Then they all walked to the grave of the miser and prayed. And when he died, the rabbi asked to be buried near the fence, next to the man known only as “The Miser.”

Much of what you give to God through your church goes to help people who will never know that you are the source of their comfort, nor you know their identity. That is as it should be.

Consider these:

- Children simply coming to Jesus on Sunday morning, with all the benefit of Sunday School and our wonderfully creative WoRM program, yet with no thought of who provides it, imagining, as children do, that—well, it’s just there.
- Twenty odd youth going on their annual mission trip, now in its—what, eleventh year?—to places as distantly remote as Mexico, North Dakota, and the New York/Canada border, especially those who come as guests and friends. They have little idea who provides the resources. But what life transforming events they are, as Kelly Castafero put it in her splendid piece in the current newsletter, getting a chance to live “Outside the Box.”
- Those who come to the elder care facility in El Salvador, run faithfully for years now by Bill Sulit’s mother, have never met you. Perhaps they’ve seen a photo of us, as we have of them, but no more. Yet you support that ministry and help bring vitality and caring to their otherwise pedestrian days.
- The young mother in Nicaragua, sitting in the half-light in a two room, breeze block house, working at a used sewing machine purchased with a low interest microloan that you provided. This year we rolled-over \$10,000 back into the program run by Sostenica, the principal of a multitude of small loans that poor people borrowed to try and make an

economic difference in their lives. They do make a difference. And every penny of every loan has been paid back by those very grateful people.

- The layette on which a new mother lays her newborn child in Guyana, or Bangladesh, or Cuba, made by our ladies every month of the year in the Kean Room. She does not know us from Adam, yet her gratitude is palpable.
- The fisherman's family in Aceh, Indonesia, a region torn asunder by tsunami and internal strife, now healing by the intervention of your gifts through the labors of Plowshares Institute, committed to help people resolve conflict and rebuild hope.
- The Gulf Coast survivor returning to the home that just twelve months ago was under ten feet of water. We have never met him. But his life is returning to some semblance of order, and he is immensely grateful.
- The visitors who come to St. John's for worship, a study group, seminar or workshop, do not know you, yet when they leave they feel that we have enlarged their spirit and fed their soul.
- Melmark, Peter's Place, Baker Industries, Surrey Services, The Other Carpenter, Habitat for Humanity, Sherwood Community Church with its soup kitchen and day care—all are sustained, in part, by your good stewardship, and give value back into the lives of thousands of local people.
- The young couples, to whom other churches cannot or will not provide space and counsel for their marriages, find here an open door and receptive hearts because you make this ministry possible. And their life together begins on a different path because of you. but you do not know them, or they you, for the most part.
- Those whom we counsel, the bereaved who otherwise have no church home, the recent immigrants whom your staff and members lovingly teach English and befriend. They are here when you are elsewhere, like ships crossing in the open sea, and that matters not. But they are grateful beyond words.

And so it goes on, day after ordinary day, yet each day touched with a warm undercurrent of secret caring within these walls and across the globe. And because you care, their hearts are very full.

There, but for the grace of God go I—go you! How, in the mystery of God's providence, I sometimes wonder, did this (my) soul get into this body and not some other? All we can say to such personal musings is "Thank you, Lord!" with the promise in gratitude for all these differences made, to give more of ourselves away.

Amen.