

Rich Towards God

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Jesus is teaching his disciples when a young man interrupts him to make his plea: “Master,” he says, “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Jesus does not accept this invitation to intervene in family affairs. “Who set me to be a judge or arbiter over you?” he asks.

Instead of answering the young man’s question, he tells a story – a popular technique of his. A rich man got an exceptionally good crop one year. So good that his barns could not hold all of it. And, being a shrewd business man, he did not want to sell at the lower price generated by the good harvest but wanted to save his grain and sell it when the prices rose and he could make even more money. So he tore down the smaller barns, built larger barns filled them and then sat back with satisfaction. “Relax, eat, drink and be merry,” he said to himself, certain that he had ensured his well being and good fortune for years to come. “Fool,” God replies, “tonight you die, and who then will inherit all of this wealth?” And Jesus adds: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich towards God.” But are not rich towards God.

Tonight we are looking at the life of the church as well as our own individual lives and we must ask ourselves: Are we storing up treasures for ourselves but are not rich towards God? Odd phrase, isn’t it “be rich towards God.” What does it mean to be rich towards God?

Both of these stories, and the familiar injunction to consider the lilies of the fields which follows, are about our relationship with possessions. The young man is

dissatisfied with how his older brother has divided the inheritance or perhaps because the older brother has chosen to keep the family land intact so it can provide for future generations rather than dividing it into increasingly smaller plots. In any case, the younger brother wants his share.

The rich man has gotten more than his fair share! He is satisfied with his ability to provide for himself now and in the future. His satisfaction excludes God from his life: he neither sees God involved in his good fortune, nor does he recognize God's involvement in his future. His possessions are his: he earned them, he owns them and they reassure him that he is set for life. Until he faces death, that is!

Church are often not unlike people. While we rarely see ourselves as greedy, we do tend to focus a great deal on possessions – we worry about our buildings, we covet more people and we especially look for more money. Unfortunately, these things distract the church from its mission and from its call to be “rich towards God.” Each crisis we encounter seems to increase our need and, frankly, our greed.

The crisis-de-jour might be local: a dispute over the rector, the service time, the hymn selections, the furniture arrangements. Or it might be national: the revolutionary war at the start of our nation, the civil war that threatened to divide the South and the North, the civil rights movement in the sixties, the new Prayer Book and women's ordination in the seventies and now the issue of gays and lesbians in the church.

Each of these crises has turned the church's attention from mission to greed. When we feel threatened by change, almost any change, we begin to worry about what we have and what we might lose. As soon as some disagreement emerges,

someone decides to withhold their pledge! The rest of the congregation then begins worrying about how many people will stop giving money and can we make it financially? If things get worse, we begin arguing over how to divide the inheritance. Who gets which people? And who gets the building, the endowment and other assets? Even if the struggle remains typically Anglican “polite” there almost always is a competition for people – who is on our side and who is against us?

The desire for possessions, be they people, property or money, seems to be fed by conflict. And our church has certainly had its fair share of conflicts. So we are almost always in a state of seeking more – more money, more people, more programs and, in the end, more power. Most of our desire for “more” is, I believe, driven by our anxiety about losing what we have. We have unconsciously bought into the world’s assumptions that we will be secure if we have more.

Jesus doesn’t disagree with that – he simply offers a different definition of what we need “more” of! We don’t need more land or barns filled with grain. Our security doesn’t depend on getting more people to attend our churches or having a hugely successful pledge campaign. We don’t need to have more people on our side or have our own church complete with endowment.

What we need is to be “rich towards God.” In other words, what we need is more awareness of and gratitude for what God has already given us. Being rich towards God is being the rich man who knows his good fortune is a gift from God and not just the results of his good work. Being rich towards God is being the rich man who is thankful for what God has given him and confident that God will provide what he needs – not the grain in his newly built barns.

For the church, being rich towards God means knowing that God has given us more than we can ever ask for or even imagine – being deeply thankful for that and having the confidence that God will give us whatever we need to be and do that which God calls us to be and do. That sense of gratitude and confidence in God keeps us from being worried about all the things that distract us from truly being the church.

I don't want to say that all of the issues that have been conflictual in the church aren't important. They are. But they aren't as important as being the church God created us to be.....they aren't as important as fulfilling God's mission in the world. And when any one of those conflicts distract us from being the church, we have given in to our inner greed – our need to hold on to and rely on what we own instead of holding on to and relying on God.

I was ordained in 1977 – at the time when our church had just started ordaining women. I was the baby of that first generation – the youngest of the first 100 women ordained in this church. I was fortunate. I didn't have to wait for years. I wasn't really involved in the struggles. I was ordained in April and became the part-time rector of a small church that fall. I never preached a sermon about the ordination of women and, frankly, rarely talked about it. I had decided that I simply would BE an ordained woman and not worry about the conflict that issue generated.

People would ask if the ordination of women was the “right” thing for us to do and my reply was always the same. “I don't know. All I know is that this is what I felt called to be and do. I trust the rest to God. If the ordination of women is “of God” it will flourish and grow; if not it will wither away.” I didn't need to worry about

whether the decision to ordain women was right or wrong. I trusted that God would take care of that. I simply needed to be faithful in carrying out mission and ministry that God had entrusted to me.

The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Our call is to carry out Christ's ministry of reconciliation in the world. That's why we're here. That's the reason the church exists. There have been, there are and there always will be many things that we disagree about how to live and work together. But that cannot – it DARE not – distract us from carrying out the mission given to us.

We live in a time when the world is increasingly out of touch with the power and love of God. While most Americans still identify themselves as Christians and engage in some religious behaviors like reading the Bible and praying, many do not have a deep and nourishing spiritual life. While most Americans live better than the rest of the world, we still have those who go to bed hungry or have no bed to go to. If we move outside of this country, we see millions without food, shelter, health care, freedom or justice.

A teenage girl in Haiti who is mentally ill lives in a wooden pen the community built to contain her while they give her a random mixture of expired medications donated by our pharmaceutical companies in hopes that whatever they are giving her might help. Down the road villagers drink the only water available since the hurricane – water flowing down the streets covered with dirt, feces and decaying bodies. That's where our attention must be – not on our desire for more people, possessions or power.

A woman in Darfur has already been raped repeatedly, yet struggles to maintain some semblance on family life and protect herself and her children from being slaughtered. That's where our attention must be – not on our desire for more people, possessions or power.

An man has already served 24 years for a crime he did not commit when the state refuses to pay for the DNA test that eventually would prove him innocent. His son, growing up with no father, no family income and no hope is in jail. His child, just entering his teen years, may not be far behind. That's where our attention must be – not on getting more people, possessions or power.

We worry a great deal about keeping the church doors open, paying the ever increasing health care and salary costs, attracting more people and providing more programs. Our conflicts make us more anxious and we worry even more about “making it.”

Jesus tells us not to worry about those things. He calls us to be rich towards God – to be aware of and thankful for all the God has already given us. And to be confident that God will give us whatever we need. Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you. Focus on the mission. Do not be distracted by anything. Not by crisis. Not be the siren call of greed. Not by others who tempt you to follow them down another path. Focus on the mission. Be the church. Be the People of God. Be rich towards God. And God will give us more than we can ever ask or imagine.

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