

Rich Towards God  
August 5, 2007  
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First Presbyterian Church  
1 Kings 17:8-16  
Luke 12:13-21

Sunday afternoons were family time when I was growing up. When summer got to its height, around this time in early August, my grandparents would come to our house on Sunday afternoon and stay for dinner. Every one of those meals felt like a feast; the table would be filled with fresh vegetables from the family garden. Green beans, zucchini, carrots, red potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, small green onions, all of them picked fresh that day. We worked on this meal all afternoon but it never felt like a chore; it was one of those times when the preparation was just joy because you knew how wonderful it was all going to taste.

There was another part of these Sunday dinners that I really loved, and that was the fact that we pulled the kitchen table away from the wall to make room for everyone to sit. This change thrilled me. Since I was the youngest one at the table, my traditional spot for meals was behind the table nearest the wall. Usually my mother pulled the end of the table closest to her out from the wall and I slipped into my chair with barely enough room to squirm out. There were countless upsets with my being stuck behind the table, but on these Sundays – what freedom! It was such a little difference, but it made those meals extra special, even as they became memories.

There is something in these moments, an understanding of generosity that is not possible to put into words. It can only be appreciated in the movement of doing whatever action is required. It could be pulling carrots, washing beans, slicing zucchini, or pulling your chair out just a little bit farther away from the wall. Generosity is not something that is understood from its definition; generosity is something that springs forth from us. It is a way of moving, and living, and having our being.

The two lessons for today teach us about generosity, although in quite different ways. Let us turn first to the parable Jesus tells in the passage we heard from Luke's gospel. It sounds at first like a great success story, a certain man who is rich already, has had a particularly abundant harvest from the land. It is more than what he can contain in his current storage system, so he decides, logically, to build bigger barns for his crops. He envisions these larger barns and the crops that they hold united with the happiness of his soul. Jesus tells us the inward thoughts of this rich man, as he shares the good news with his Soul of the upcoming rest, relaxation and merriment that awaits him. This soliloquy only pushes the man farther up the pedestal from which we know he is about to tumble off. It comes quickly and with harshness. "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

There is no doubt that this parable fits with other parables, particularly in Luke's gospel, where Jesus warns of the behavior of those who are rich. The most familiar comes later in Luke's gospel, when a rich man comes to Jesus asking how he can obtain eternal life. He is comfortable with all the commandments Jesus asks him to follow, but he is crestfallen when he hears Jesus charge him: "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have

treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” You remember his reaction, he becomes quite sad, we told, because “he was very rich.”

This man’s fate in the parable we heard today is painfully uncomfortable to hear. He does not seem to be wasteful or boastful with others, he just seems to be trying to make a better life for himself. The abundance he has gathered is not just taken from him in the end, his very life is DEMANDED from him. His story is too tragic; his dreams are too similar to our own dreams of comfort and stability and our desire for relaxation. We do not want to share his fate.

As I read this parable about this rich man each day this past week, I discovered the dredging power of his isolation. His separation is expressed not just his inner dialogue that leaves one feeling as if he has no one else to tell, it is also expressed that last part of the question that God asks which really disturbs me: “All these things you have, whose will they be?” If we look at this parable through the lens of not only this man’s wealth but of his solitude in that abundance, we begin to understand how his absence of generosity is what makes him a fool in God’s eyes.

It is not just his abundance which is a problem; it is his lack of connection to anyone or anything. There is no mention of community, friends, family, and he indicates no intention of sharing this abundantly rich harvest with anyone around him. To be rich towards God one must have a connection to others, there must be community, there must be generosity; Jesus is pointing out this lack of attachment as what keeps this man from enjoying the richness of being close to God. Jesus teaches that in order to be rich towards God we must focus on God AND on our love of our neighbor. We cannot simply stand looking up to heaven; we must fill our days with generosity towards each other.

The woman whom Elijah meets in 1 Kings 17 witnesses to generosity. She acts in the polar opposite way of the rich man in the parable Jesus tells. We meet her with Elijah at the gate of the city where she is gathering sticks. We enter the narrative in a much larger context when an argument of authority is raging between Elijah, a prophet of YHWH, and Ahab, the king of Israel at that time.

Ahab came from a line of kings who were having political troubles with the Philistines, internal troubles about succession of the royal line, and religious woes with idol worship. Ahab’s father, Omri is described as “doing more evil than all who were before him” so one would think Ahab had nowhere to go but up, however, Ahab makes an early and unforgivable mistake, he marries the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon, you know of her, I’m sure, her name was Jezebel. She is portrayed in many provocative ways in literature and in Hollywood, but she provokes the anger of the Lord, not because of her Hollywood persona, but because she firmly worships another God, Baal, and she brings Ahab into this practice. This makes Ahab even worse than his father in God’s eyes, and Elijah is sent by God to explain to Ahab that there will be a drought throughout the land as punishment for this betrayal.

In the midst of this drought, Elijah is sent from place to place by God; and at each of these places, he depends on the generosity of others to survive. Along his journey, he is sent to meet this widow. It is no accident that she lives in Zaraphath, in Sidon, the country in which Jezebel was raised. That tiny little detail helps us understand this narrative so much better. The woman’s generosity is more amazing because it is unexpected, for why would a woman, a widow, in this town feel any compunction to feed this man of YHWH, who appears at the city gate?

Her demeanor with Elijah is not one that signals in advance the generosity she will enact. Her straight-forwardness about her upcoming fate is a clear rebuff of his request. He is asking for

more than what she can give. She recognizes their religious differences, and explains to him her lack of bread even to feed herself and her son: “As the Lord YOUR God lives,” she says to him, “I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.”

If I was with Elijah, I can’t help but hope I would have the courage to tug on his sleeve and suggest that we look for someone else to ask, perhaps God had another widow in mind. But one thing the prophets can teach us is the power of confidence. Elijah does not even flinch, he tells her not to be afraid, but to do as she has planned and continue with her plans, but to bring him some of the bread, giving her the assurance that the meal and the oil will not be emptied, but will “not fail until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.” The woman does as Elijah asked, and we are told that “she as well as he and her household ate for many days.”

This partnership testifies the meaning of generosity. The number of reasons she has to not be generous only makes her generosity that much more astounding. If we juxtapose her story with the parable of the rich man from Luke, we see how quickly their paths depart in opposite directions. He has a great deal to begin with, she has almost nothing. He receives a bountiful harvest, she is gathering sticks for her last meal. He is in his solitude anticipating his pleasurable life. She is with her family anticipating her likely death. He finds his abundance has not granted him solidarity, she finds her scarcity has granted her communion.

They are at the ends of a spectrum on which we most often find ourselves in the middle. We rarely find ourselves with such abundance that we are tempted to hoard it; and we rarely find ourselves with such scarcity that we fear for our lives. Our lack of parallel experiences with these two biblical narratives may lull us into thinking that our opportunities to be rich toward God are few in number. How often do we hesitate to be generous because the cost is too little or too great? But yet, how often we find ourselves together at this table?

It is not an accident that the sacraments are part of our regular experience of worship. The sacrament of communion is one of the most significant rites we celebrate together, because at its heart is reminder about generosity. Communion is the whole of that spectrum on which we find the plentiful experiences of generosity. We may think about our relationship with God more when we celebrate communion, but listen to where God is pointing in each one of these narratives – God is pointing us also toward each other. When we say in the communion liturgy, “Men and women and children will come from east and west, from north and south, and sit at the table in the kingdom of God”, we are recognizing the openness of the table and the broad array of places from where people come to the table. This diversity is an opportunity, the opportunity to be generous to each another in the way that God has been generous to us.

Communion transforms us beyond this moment; it calls us to remember the widow, to remember Elijah, to remember the rich man. The experience of sacrament charges us to see in every decision, no matter how mundane or how outrageous, an opportunity for generosity.

When we say in the communion liturgy that “we do not have to be good, for no one is good but God alone,” this is good news for me, for you and for our neighbor. When we say, “we do not have to feel worthy, none of us comes here by our worthiness,” this is good news for me, for you and for our neighbor. When we say, “everyone is welcome here. This is God’s table and here, all of the worldly distinctions are known and celebrated. Here we remember Jesus’ invitation, ‘Anyone who comes to me I will in no wise cast out,’” this is good news for me, for you and for our neighbor. Generosity is the act of realizing that this promise is not just for ourselves, it is for each person we encounter.

Generosity is not limited by our denominational identification, by our goodness, by our worthiness, by what makes us unique. Generosity is the act of living out what we celebrate at this table; it is the act of being at God's table in every little ordinary action of our day. Generosity is that place where we are known and celebrated and not just by God, but by each other. We are all rich and called to share from our abundance, we are all widows and called to share from our scarcity, we are all prophets called to share from our confidence. For in this act, we are not storing up treasures for ourselves, we are acting in all the richness that God has provided for us. It is time to live into generosity; it is time to pull out the table and make room for each other. O taste and see that the Lord is good!