

The Fruit of the Spirit: Generosity
Jeremiah 31:10-17
Luke 12:13-21

““And I will say to my soul, Soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool!’”

Luke alone tells the story of a certain rich man who did not understand his situation at all. What is clear in the parable is that he thought his problem had to do with storage room. “What shall I do,” he asked, “for I have nowhere to store my crops.” It is the perennial human problem: what to do with our “stuff” as George Carlin once put it, when basements no longer suffice, closets take on a Fibber Magee and Molly quality, walls cannot accommodate all the art, and the baby finally needs a room of her own. To all of that the rich man says, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods.” It is a logical and familiar solution—especially if interest rates are low and unemployment high: you cannot afford *not* to build an addition, to add a wing, to tear down a wall or two for the sake of a sound investment in the future.

If the rich man’s problem is space, then what he has chosen to do is both logical and fiscally responsible. But the point of the parable is simply that this rich man *missed* the point of his life. He thought his problem was space, and in that light he knew he could solve his problem with the help of a contractor. In fact, he even thought a barn would be the solution to *all* of his problems, imagining that once the barns were built and his riches safely stored away, he would be able to say to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry!” Can you imagine?

But before he can hire an architect and begin to draw up plans, another voice enters the story, a voice that leaves the rich man speechless. “Fool!” says God. “This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The question is a

question not of space but of possession. Not what belongs to us and what shall we do with it, but to whom do we belong and what shall we do.

The word we must do business with this morning is *agathosune* from the root word *agathos*: good. In both the King James and the Revised Standard translations of the fruit of the Spirit *agathosune* is understood to mean “goodness”, whereas the NRSV committee, for such a time as this, renders *agathosune* as “generosity”. I cannot help but think of another story that appears a little later in Luke about a rich young man and Jesus. “Good teacher,” says the young man, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good (*agathos*)?” Jesus asks him. “No one is good but God alone.” By the end of that story, the rich young man who has been “good” according to the commandments is invited to sell all he has, give to the poor and follow Jesus. He goes away sorrowful, we read, because he had many possessions.

Goodness and generosity. If these two men are any indication, we would do well to turn first to God and not to ourselves to see the coincidence. No doubt our experience of God’s goodness begins with God’s generosity toward us: in creating a world that is “good” and placing us in that world as stewards of God’s “good” creation; in the self-emptying of God, God’s sending his Son to dwell with us in life; and at the hour of our death, in God’s making room in himself for us eternally. If there is any goodness in us, it must be a reflected goodness, an imputed goodness, the goodness of God’s image we haltingly bear when, by grace, we give ourselves away for love’s sake.

So in relation to the fruit of the Spirit that is goodness embodied in self-giving, in generosity, the question is not “How can we be generous?” or “How can I do good?” It is not a question of our good intentions (an ethic of motives) or a question of our good behavior (an ethic of consequences). It is a matter of faith: of whether or not we put all our trust in God who alone

is good, a trust that begets generosity. That would seem to be the issue for the rich man and his barns as well as the rich young man who went away sorrowful. Their trust in things—a work of the flesh—seems to have trumped the fruit of the Spirit. We begin, therefore, as we have in past weeks, with the work of the flesh that we know all too well. We begin with our trust in things which, when numbered among the deadly sins, is known as greed.

Thomas Aquinas understood the work of the flesh that is greed to be a sin directly against one's neighbor, "since one man cannot abound in external riches without another man lacking them." As for the Reformers, for Luther and Calvin in particular, greed was a "transgression of the limit set for us in the world by God the Creator, the consequence of which is a struggle over sovereignty," according to Paul Lehmann. That is to say, there is a power struggle going on in us over who is really in control of our lives and our future, a struggle "that effectively prevents us from discerning what really belongs to whom, and from living accordingly." Greed is the sin of "desiring a life subject to human control over a life of vulnerable trust" in God alone. Think of the man storing up stuff in his barns to secure his future; think of the rich young man who loved his stuff more than he loved God.

Of course this is not how popular opinion would characterize our Protestant take on the accumulation of possessions. Max Weber's analysis of Reformed Protestantism and capitalism has made the sin of greed our very own, albeit greed cleverly recast in the virtue of thrift and saving. Weber looked at the coincidence of Reformed communities--and nations committed to the accumulation of capital--and concluded that a certain kind of theology was necessary to undergird a capitalist economy. It had to be a theology that bred persons who in no way desired enjoyment or possession per se, but who were characterized by a desire for gain. In a way, you could say our current troubles have to do with enjoyment and possession getting the better of us!

Whereas before people worked to meet basic needs, now people worked in order to accumulate savings. Yet the reason for this seems far from the sin in question. In Calvinism, for the first time work is given a religious character and becomes an ethical demand. A person works not to live, but because God commands it. Weber noted that now the work of a person was a mark of that person's election or non-election by God. Therefore little of what is accumulated in work is to be spent because one is called by God to work and show evidence of productivity rather than to seek pleasure. Weber concluded that the result of this working hard and spending little is saving; and this saving will always be in search of new investments.

But unlike the Calvinists of whom Weber wrote, John Calvin espoused a different relationship of human beings to the things they possess, a kind of voluntary communitarian understanding of what we have and hold. Some explain this by the fact that early on in his ministry Geneva was flooded with poor refugees. It was in this situation that Calvin preached, wrote his biblical commentaries, and led a congregation to live out its faith.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of Calvin's theology of possession involved the role deacons played in Geneva. Deacons were charged with the redistribution of wealth within and outside the church community. They were to keep the flow of goods and services going by calling on those who had more than they needed and, with nothing as discreet as an undisclosed tax return or sealed church pledge, commanding them to hand over their excess for the needs of the poor. Said Calvin, "God wills that there be proportion and equality among us, that is, each man is to provide for the needy according to the extent of his means so that no man has too much and no man had too little. Let those that have riches, whether they have been left by inheritance or procured by industry and efforts, consider that their abundance was not intended to be laid out in intemperance or excess, but in relieving the necessities of the brethren." Can you imagine? It

takes my breath away, truly!

He further believed that as the rich had responsibility to the poor, so the poor had a mission to the rich. The poor were the receivers of God, the vicars of God, the solicitors of God who offer the rich an opportunity of ridding themselves of monetary slavery, an opportunity to be saved from greed.

All of this he said because he believed we were created for fellowship with one another and with God. He joined Paul in proclaiming that we are members of one body; that we are made to live in mutuality; that another person's need is embraced as though it were our own; that all goods are from God and are to be used in the service of others.

In short, Weber was right in connecting Calvin's thought to the rich. However, like the rich man in the parable, he missed the point. For what Calvin proclaimed in his day was not what it was to be rich in goods and so greedy or rich in savings and so secure, but what it meant to be rich toward God and so generous. Back to the word of the day at last! But if this is so, then like the rich young man, we want to know exactly how generous. Far from urging some legalistic calculation of human generosity, Calvin writes, "God...nowhere specifies the sum, that, often making a calculation, we might divide between ourselves and the poor...but calls us to take the rule of love as our guide." To take the rule of love as our guide: the self-emptying, self-giving love of Christ, losing our lives to find them, dying to ourselves and living to God.

Still with the rich young ruler we cannot help but ask after the details. "If you wish to enter into life," says Jesus to start the conversation, "keep the commandments." "Which ones?" we ask so that we may mention how good we have been. "You shall not murder," begins Jesus. "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and your mother; also You shall love your neighbor as yourself." "I have kept all

these,” we say to Jesus with a straight face. And though Jesus could have called our bluff on any one of the commandments, he calls our bluff on the eighth, calls us on the possessions that possess us, on the bondage that keeps us from the freedom God commands, on the things we own whose proper use we have forgotten, on our greed.

We go away sorrowful Sunday after Sunday, unaware of the destinies we have confounded by our politics, the livelihoods foreclosed by our neglect of another’s need, the exploitation of another’s weakness. We have kept the commandments, we say to Jesus, except for one--the one that encompasses all the rest, the one that would create room in us for the fruit of the Spirit that is generosity.

From that one Jesus is doing his best, this side of the grave, to set us free. Sell all you possess, he says, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. It is another way of saying, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you.” “Who can be saved?” we joke as we turn toward home. Thanks be to God that for *God* in Christ all things are possible! Amen.