

“Money, Giving, and Salvation”

Sermon by the Rev. Joe Summers for Sunday, November 13th, 2011

(Readings: Judges 4:1-7, Psalm 123, I Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30)

“God has not destined you for wrath, but for obtaining salvation....therefore encourage one another and build each other up, as indeed you are doing.”

I Thessalonians 5:10-11

Our gospel today is one of the most misunderstood, used, and abused stories in our scriptures. For some it's been a divine mandate for capitalism and a world where “them that got is them that gets” and them that don't lose what little they have. Others have made it into a sweet moral about not hiding your talents under a bushel. Undoubtedly, that's part of why in our collect today we pray that we may read the scriptures in such a way that they are saving. This implies there are ways that we can read the scriptures which are bad news, which we certainly know to be true.

In this series, I'm talking about how giving can help us break through the barriers that keep us from being able to experience paradise, heaven on earth, here and now. Last week I talked about how, through giving/spending time, we can open ourselves to the experience of the fullness of time, which in turn allows us to experience grace upon grace. This week I want to talk about giving money, as a key to overcoming the wrath that would keep us defining ourselves as victims and leading fear-driven lives, lives in which we don't give and receive the love we want because we're so afraid, because, like the character in today's story, we bury our hopes and gifts, thinking that, by not engaging in life, we can somehow come through less scathed by the kind of wrath that story refers to.

So how does giving money relate to the reign of love on earth, to the reality of loving and being loved, knowing others and being known by them?

First, one of the things I've learned in my years here in this parish is that giving plays a central role in overcoming a sense of victimization that would keep us living in that fearful place in which we never come to know fullness of life.

Hearing that I was going to talk about overcoming victimization, my daughter Kate sent me a quote from Aung San Suu Kyi, the Noble Peace Prize Winner from Myanmar. When her people told her how helpless they felt under military rule, she responded by saying, “If you're feeling helpless, help someone.” In some ways it's that simple. Giving/helping others can be one of the best ways to empower ourselves and overcome the kind of life-defining fear that would control us.

Who feels like a victim, and what has made us feel victimized, is very complex. You can be one of the 1% and still live in a place of fear, still feel like a victim when it comes to money. I've

also learned through my years in this parish that it's possible to be one of the poor and not live in that place. The inability to give to others is a sign of one's sense of victimization. Grace-filled giving is a powerful tool to overcome it.

Again and again I've met wealthy people who have never learned to give. That may sound like a cliché, but if you look at the statistic on giving in this country, you find that the wealthy give proportionally less of their income than other groups. In my experience many of the wealthy who don't give, don't give because they have no money. They have no money because they are living beyond their means and, to be able to give, you need to live below your means. They don't live below their means because they are afraid that, only by living in large houses, or owning expensive things, or doing expensive things, or giving the best of everything to their children, will they feel successful and/or win that rat race that is the pursuit of wealth.

Here I want to say that I think that the kind of wrath/punishment that's described in our gospel today has nothing to do with any divine wrath, but that doesn't make it any less powerful. The logic that justifies the 1/10th of 1% having or controlling the majority of wealth, while large sections of society are left destitute and hungry, is a logic that seems to have dominated so much of recorded human history, and seems to happen, except in those societies that structure themselves to resist it.

Because we still buy into the illusion of materialism, we generally believe that if you are wealthy you must be well. The ways the pursuit of wealth can control the lives of the wealthy remains largely hidden. If learning to give is part of what draws the wealthy to church, I'm afraid, in the past, I've failed to help those who are wealthy learn how to give. I was too afraid of alienating them, too afraid it would sound like the kind of self-serving message we hear from churches and ministers a lot of the time, or the kind of guilt tripping that tends not to help anyone. But I'm going to try not to keep making this mistake in the future, because it's very evident to me that, from the perspective of the heart, the way we relate to wealth is every bit as problematic as how we relate to poverty.

In contrast, through this congregation, I've come to witness the world over-coming faith of many poor people and people with very limited incomes. These are people who manage to give significant portions of their income, even though they barely seem to have enough to make it, even though they may be raising children in poverty. And their ability to reign, even in the midst of their economic insecurity, clearly has to do with a practice of trust which they enact through a discipline of giving. You can only give your first fruits, that is your income before you know how everything is going to work out, either through guilt or the superstitious fear of punishment, both of which we absolutely want to avoid, or through the practice of a kind of trust that says---"I'm not going to let this wrath-filled world determine my ability to live as one of God's beloved, one who devotes myself to loving and being loved--with all my heart, mind and soul." The practice of giving is like a hedge that they build around their hearts that says "I'm living by trust and faith and love. I can't live, I can't breathe without faith and trust and love." Giving incarnates that kind of faith, makes it a reality. We've heard from Gloria and oth-

ers how the world shifts, how the unexpected happens, how poverty becomes no longer poverty, when people develop this ability to give in and amidst all circumstances. This is the miracle we also see in many traditional cultures, where people learned to live lives of immense graciousness and hospitality, even in the midst of scarcity. This is the miracle of the kind of culture which African American slaves created, in the midst of some of history's greatest brutality and degradation--a culture where people learned to give to the broader community--even if it cost them everything. It proved they were not chattel, not things, but children of God, destined to inherit the earth.

Building up a wall of wealth and privilege not only does not seem to overcome a sense of victimization, but rather seems to reinforce it. We see it in the Detroit Suburbs. We see it here in Ann Arbor, where our youth report that they feel they are fed a daily diet of messages that say that life is rat race and, unless you do everything perfectly--you will fail and never know real happiness. It is in this context that we have the message of St. Francis, telling us that it is through giving, that we can overcome our fears of abandonment, our fears that tell us we never have enough, and therefore may not survive. Giving as the practice of grace, graces us, helps to transform our experience of the world, helps free us from lives defined by fear and isolation.

It was in Jesus' calling attention to a child's willingness to give all he or she had, a few loaves and fishes, that a hungry mob found the power to overcome the fears that bound them. Those fears were keeping them from sharing what they were hoarding with others. They would have kept them from knowing the abundance of the feast of the beloved, the feast that happens when we each share what we have with others. That's the miracle that spoke most clearly to those in the ancient world, particularly the poor, who knew what it was to not have enough to feed themselves or their family, who knew, what's even worse, how the wrath of poverty can shape their whole being and who found in the story of Jesus Christ the power to overcome this wrath as it is symbolized by the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Now this vision of the loaves and fishes brings me to my other point, and that is that I've come to believe that the giving that I really believe in, the giving that I think is most transformative in terms of helping us to experience the reign of love on earth, is the kind of giving that is rooted in mutuality.

There is a way that I no longer believe in charity as it's often understood. I've seen too many people who receive, but who never in turn learn to give, or who give, but never learn to receive. Those who receive but never learn to give stay bound in chains of self concern that blind them to the needs of others. Giving but not receiving keeps you blind to your own needs and the joy that comes from letting yourself be loved. Too often what's called charity reinforces the mentality of I-it relationships, relationships in which one person is being treated like an object. When this happens, it further cuts us off from the fullness of our humanity. In contrast, the ring of love is a circle in which we give and receive. It is the song of creation that calls us into the feast of life. It is all about the discovery of the power that is the heart of I-Thou relationships. If you are living in a place where you are receiving and not giving in return, then you not hear-

ing this glorious song. If you are giving and not receiving, not letting others love you in return, you also are not hearing this resurrection song.

Increasingly I've come to believe that the more mutual are our relationships --- the more redemptive they are. I think it's not helpful for us to have some relationships where we receive all the time and other relationships where we give all the time. Too often this keeps us from ever really knowing the reality of I-Thou relationships, keeps us from discovering the reality of really loving and being loved, keeps us from entering into the vulnerability and openness that is at the heart of fully knowing and being known, as it is symbolized by the mutual washing of feet. This image of the mutual washing of feet is about a love that is not abstract, but is rooted in our real needs. This kind of love helps to break down shame and the kind of illusions we have about ourselves and each other, illusions which isolate us, as they keep us from ever really knowing others, or being known by them.

Jesus said it is harder for the rich to enter into the reign of loving and being loved than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Dorothy Day understood this to mean that Christ came to make the rich poor and the poor holy. We enter the kingdom of love naked. We cannot enter it holding onto our wealth, whatever form our wealth takes. We cannot enter the realm of love, putting our trust in money, and then using our money to be kind to others. Rather we enter the realm of love by putting our trust in love, and then using our money to live out this feast. This is the joy that St. Francis and his friends discovered at the dawn of capitalism. It is the joy of living a life of fully giving and receiving. It reminds me of the brother who came to speak to us about how getting AIDS had saved his life, as it enabled him to fully let others love him, and fully to give himself in love to others, in a way he had never been able to do before.

Graceful giving is a fundamental spiritual practice. It is one of the keys to being able to experience the realm of the beloved. Living in one of the wealthiest nations in history, we find ourselves bombarded daily by threatening messages that say that we don't have what we need to be happy. In this context, learning to live below our means, so that that we can give to others, becomes one of the most important counter-cultural actions we can do. In the midst of this society, it helps us to grow a more humane culture and to testify to what true happiness is about.

And if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.