

This is the Big One
Meditation at Redlands United Church of Christ by Loring Fiske-Phillips
August 1, 2010

Gospel Reading:
Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “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. 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! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

Let us pray. Oh God, uphold Thou me, that I might uplift Thee. Amen.

Since our three-member exploratory team is currently traveling in Haiti, I naturally have become more attuned to the news about the small island country. It’s only been about six months since the devastating earthquake hit, but that’s plenty of time for it to fall from the headlines. It’s been replaced with Chelsea Clinton’s wedding and the fact that Ellen is leaving American Idol. But really, the numbers are staggering: A quarter million people dead, at least that many injured, and one-and-a-half million homeless (that’s one in nine Haitians).

Stories and pictures from our members and many others indicate that the scene still looks pretty much like it did in the hours following the 7.0 magnitude quake. The United Nations has reported that approximately 250,000 cubic meters of rubble have been removed, but that pales in comparison to the 20 million cubic meters of rubble that remain.

Why hasn’t more been done? Why is there no clear path to recovery yet? Why does so much of the money that has been raised remain unspent? So many questions, and of course, no easy answers.

Speaking of “no easy answers,” Jesus doesn’t seem to provide any, either, in our Gospel reading from Luke. It’s a fairly straightforward request. Make my brother be fair to me. Those of you with brothers or sisters know that *fair* is in the eye of the beholder ... as in, “I be holdin’ this and you can’t have it!” But Jesus, in characteristic fashion, doesn’t answer the question that was asked. Nor does he offer an easy, one-size-fits-all answer that would fit on a yard sign. He warns to... “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Who is Jesus speaking to? To the one who wants the family possessions or the one who has them? Perhaps he’s speaking to both, for he quickly moves from a discussion about greed, material goods, and abundance, to telling them to be “rich toward God.” And what exactly does that mean?

One answer is in the context of giving money, and no, this is not a sermon about tithing, although I'm sure this passage has been used for that many times. I think Jesus is referring to our attitude. I have fantasized many times about what it would be like some day to be rich. How about you? There's even a popular song on the radio these days with Travie McCoy singing "I wanna be a billionaire ... I wanna be on the cover of Forbes magazine ... I wanna play basketball with the president ..." He says he wants to be able to buy all the things he never was able to afford. But mixed in with the shopping sprees for himself, he also sings that he wants to be able to grant someone's last wish, help the victims of Katrina, and that "not a single tummy ... would know what hungry was."

Ask anyone what they would do if they received a windfall from the lottery or a rich uncle and the answer would probably fall along those lines. Most of our answers would include giving a large portion of it away. I think that attitude of generosity is part of what Jesus is talking about by being rich toward God. Jesus is asking us to adopt that attitude, even without receiving the inheritance!

You may have heard the story about my father-in-law, who upon entering recovery from alcoholism began carrying a one-hundred-dollar bill in his wallet. Putting that money into his wallet instead of the bank didn't *make* him any richer, but he said it reminded him of how much he had. The money reminded this blue-collar worker that you don't have to have millions to feel rich and to feel like being generous. It helped change his attitude to one of being rich toward God.

But it's all too easy to focus on the money part of this story. Notice that when the rich man recognizes how much "stuff" he has, he says to himself, "I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." Why is he saying that to his soul? What use does his soul have for stuff? All the barns in the world bursting with grain will not feed your soul!

Matters of the spirit are what feed our souls. Perhaps the parable is speaking to the richness we find in prayer, in meditation and communion. How often do we put those aside until we have the material part of life taken care of? I often find myself praying during heavy traffic on the freeway or in the shower. Seldom do I set aside a task in order to enter an intentional time of meditation. I remember my mom saying to me years ago, "Loring, can't you just BE?" Unfortunately, for me, the BEing usually doesn't start until after the GOing and the DOing are all finished.

Did you notice how many times the discussion of material wealth came up in our scriptures this morning? In Psalm 49, we are reminded that "you can't take it with you." I liked the wording of this Psalm in the Message Bible: "Really! There's no such thing as self-rescue, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. The cost of rescue is beyond our means, and even then it doesn't guarantee Life forever, or insurance against the Black Hole. Anyone can see that the brightest and best die, wiped out right along with fools and dunces. They leave all their prowess behind, move into their new home, The Coffin, the cemetery their permanent address. And to think they named counties after themselves"

The passage from Colossians encourages us to set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. We are to sentence our greed to the death penalty. Pretty clear terms!

It's pretty clear that God is asking us to change our focus. If we are only paying attention to getting, we will not find the peace that God has for us in giving. If we focus only on building up our own fortunes, we will not be able to answer God's call to justice. We need to seek first the Kingdom of

God, and all these things will be added unto us. Follow this formula to love God and you'll be rich? Wow, that's the stuff of late night infomercials! No. What we will receive will be better than money. It's what we hoped we would get by buying the bigger car, the bigger house, the latest gadget ... our soul will find peace and come to a full understanding that it has enough. It's funny, isn't it, that people 2000 years ago had the same desires that we have?

So what do we do with our abundance if we don't tear down our old barns and build new ones to hold it all? I don't think Jesus provides a specific answer for us. There's no checklist of items I can hand out for everyone to take home today. I do know that we need to be open to the Spirit moving inside us. Some have heard the call to Haiti and our exploratory team is actively discerning what that means for our congregation. Others are sharing abundance with local homeless, some are listening with delight to people who need to be heard, we are speaking out on political issues, we are giving children a chance to see their parents in prison, we offer a community of artists a way to connect to the community, and on and on. But in all of this, we continue to discern where God is leading us ... how we can be God's hands and feet on earth.

It's so easy to listen to ourselves instead of God! The farmer in Luke was not a bad man. There's no evidence that he lied, cheated, or stole to get rich. He presumably worked hard and reaped a large harvest. But then he started talking to himself. Notice the language: "What should I do ... I will do this ... I will pull down my barns ... I will store my grain ... I will say to my soul." I ... I ... I.

Listening is part of being rich toward God. Who are we helping and why? Are we giving others what we want them to have or what they really need? There's a story in Maya Angelou's latest book, *Letter To My Daughter*, where she describes a dinner invitation from a friend in Senegal. She passed a room where the people were all gathered along the walls, apparently not wanting to step on the beautiful carpet in the middle of the room. Angelou was incensed. She had known people who kept their servants from walking on their fine carpets, saving them only for the feet of family and friends. She would have none of it. She walked in with her head held high, crossing over the carpet several times to admire the paintings on the walls. Soon, the staff rolled up the carpet and replaced it with a fresh one. The host announced that dinner was served in honor of Angelou, who was shocked when the carpet was set with dishes, glasses and silverware and the guests sat down on the floor. She writes, "Clever and so proper Maya Angelou, I had walked up and down over the tablecloth... In an unfamiliar culture, it is wise to offer no innovations, no suggestions, or lessons. The epitome of sophistication is utter simplicity."

So today, let us listen. Let us discern how to be rich toward God. Let us gather around this table, partaking in the gift of communion ... one of the many ways that God speaks to us and through us.

Amen and Blessed Be.