

THE POVERTY OF ABUNDANCE

Luke 12:13-25, 7/1/10

DIVIDING THE FAMILY INHERITENCE!

If there ever was a breeding ground for the virus of greed, this has to be it!

I have no scientific study to back up my hunch – but it seems to me that there have been at least as many instances of ruination of relationships, as there has been genuine blessing at the time of the dividing of an estate.

It has been said, oh so correctly, “it is only the dead that fail to reach out with both hands.”

There probably is never so fine a line of “sense of fairness” and yet that line is probably never so imaginary, as when an estate is divided.

You know the saying, “where there’s a will, there are relatives, where there is no will, there are even more.”

Greed changes the contour of one’s eye balls, and the line of fairness gets blurred quickly.

So it was for the man in the crowd who was listening to Jesus teachings as recorded in Luke 12.

But, in order to understand this reading we need to go back to the beginning of chapter 12. V. 1-3, the crowd gathers to listen to that which Jesus is teaching the Disciples. There are so many that they are trampling each other.

He begins his teaching first by talking to his Disciples. As he teaches the 12, the crowd presses in to hear. Remember, there were no cordless mics back then.

Jesus makes a statement about hypocrisy and its dangers, and then in the very next line says, “nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.”

Now, please hang on to those words for a brief moment while we go back to our text and pick up the story.

A man listening in on the teaching of the disciples imposes himself and asks Jesus to arbitrate in an obvious dispute over an estate. Jesus responds by refusing the request and then warns all those listening, “take care that greed doesn’t take over their lives, for life does not consist of abundance of possessions.”

Then he launches into a parable of abundant crops, bigger barns, and material security. Now, at this point, please remember v 1-3 where Jesus said nothing is in secret that won’t be uncovered.

In v-17 where it says of the rich man, “and he thought to himself,” it is there, that the uncovering takes place!

We, through the powers of Jesus ability to tell a parable are permitted front row seats in the arena of the soul of this man. *We are given access to such privileged information that it would make the IRS drool!*

Listen again to this conversation he had with himself in v 17-21, and notice how many times “I” and the possessive pronoun “my” is used. If this isn’t about self-centeredness and greed, I’m not a Norwegian and it hasn’t been hot in PA this summer.

“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 toward God.

WELL! What began as a request for help in settling an estate turns into something quite different, and that’s the way it often is when we ask Jesus for advice with ulterior motives.

Our stewardship emphasis doesn’t actually get under way until the fall, but I don’t pick the lectionary readings and I don’t think it will hurt us to get an early start.

I know, I know, some of you might be thinking, “that’s all preachers talk about is money.” That of course isn’t true, but do you realize what subject Jesus had more to say about than any other? Money!

I willingly admit there are many false prophets in the business of religion harvesting profits of great wealth. A week almost never goes by but what it seems there is another scam in the name of religion.

But, aside from those aberrations, the church and preachers do need to provide for a discussion of money, even if all the overhead costs were fully met and we had a good supply of money in the bank; we’d need to do it because of human nature and its propensity toward greed.

I can't say authoritatively that the following research proves greed to be one of our primary human desires but I think it does tell us something.

The Barna Group does extensive research on religious issues and church matters. In a study conducted from January 27th to February 2nd, 2010 the question was asked, "Has the weakened economy affected what Americans prioritize in life?" This is what they discovered.

When asked to identify their highest priority in life, more Americans mention issues of health, leisure, personal comfort, and lifestyle balance than just a few years ago. These priorities have grown from just 13% in 2006 to 20% in the study.

Another significant "winner" in the last few years has been Americans' increased emphasis on wealth, financial stability, money, professional attainment, success, and paying bills. It has doubled over the last four years from 9% to 17%.

The question of course is, what has the economy done to me and how have my priorities changed? How about us as a congregation?

Human nature is such that all of us will gladly let greed gloss over all the possessive pronouns we can find. We have such insatiable appetites that constant vigil is needed. We need to be surprised by the way Jesus turns the tables on us like he did to the man who wanted the family estate settled.

Just as Jesus changed the focus through his parable I want to change the focus on this subject of stewardship.

HERE'S THE CHANGE, GET THESE WORDS!

The primary purpose of giving money to the church is NOT to help the institutional church, but, to help the individual giver grow spiritually.

This is not a semantical exercise or trick, it is basic Christian doctrine of stewardship. However, the church has been seduced by the business model.

According to Jesus, **if we can believe him?** *Getting our treasure invested right helps us get our heart invested right!* “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”

Churches are not a business whose goal is to make money. No, churches are here to MAKE PEOPLE of justice, compassion and generosity; spiritually mature people whose hearts are in the right place.

Even churches that are fully endowed-as are a few are, still need to teach stewardship.

I.e. East Liberty Pres. of Pittsburg has an endowment of the plus side of \$25 million endowment and 800 members. That’s over \$31,000 for each member. It’s primarily Mellon money.

I have not dealt with a lot of congregations with significant endowments but it almost goes without saying that they all have stewardship challenges. They can easily rely on the endowment instead of week by week sacrificial giving that comes from a vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

And, who gets hurt by this “wool” that is pulled over our eyes? Primarily, the individual in his/her own spiritual journey. The church budget is a secondary victim.

Stewardship, as Jesus taught it, emphasizes the NEED of the giver to give as part of his/her spiritual relationship with God, not the need of the church to receive.

Repeat

We need to give because of gratitude to God, more so than because the church has bills to pay. The why, how and how much we give is all tied up in our relationship to God, we cannot separate the two!!!

We must understand all giving of time, talent and treasure is to be done out of gratitude to God; that is a different language and our behavior will not change until our language changes.

Offerings are always a spiritual matter involving the giving of ourselves. Every Sunday when we call for the ushers to come forward and receive our tithes and offerings there is a transaction that is about to take place that is profoundly spiritual.

Fund raising is a financial matter involving the paying of bills, offerings are quite different. One belongs in the church and the other in United Way.

The scripture lesson this morning began with a question for help in settling an estate; and what was Jesus basic answer? Get a life. Get a life that lasts beyond this one.

Investing in eternity always produces the best returns. Jesus shifted the focus to the real issue.

The giving patterns here at PPC are changing and that is good. You have always been generous but often waited for December to roll around and then play catch-up. That is not first fruit giving. You are beginning to give consistently and not waiting for the end of the year. This is resulting in a strong position as you call your next HOS.

Most of you have experienced a conversion of your purse along with your heart; some I think are still in the process...God is working on you.

A conversion of the heart results in an eversion of the purse, it gets turned inside out.

If we relax in the bounteous grace of God we can release more of the bounteous resources God has asked us to care for responsibly.

Just as there was a conversation between the man in the parable and his soul, so we all must do the same.

When we engage in a conversation with our soul, a conversation with honesty before God; we will be stripped of the possessive pronoun "MY" because it all really belongs to God.

Then we shall be released of the poverty of abundance and maybe our experience will be similar to that of a Mr. George Peas in Maryland. That is spelled P-e-a-s, His tombstone says,

"HERE LIES PEAS,
IT'S NOT REALLY PEAS, IT'S JUST THE POD.
PEAS SHELLLED OUT AND WENT TO GOD."