

“On Being Rich Toward God”

Luke 12:13-21

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August 7, 2016

South Glastonbury

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Preachers love it when this text from Luke’s Gospel comes around! It gives us a chance to talk about God’s economy, which turns out to be very different from the economic theories one might learn in college textbooks. My son, Sam, happens to teach Economic Theory at Virginia Military Institute, and was recently elevated to full professor; so this parable of the Wealthy Farmer makes for exciting table talk.

What’s different about God’s economy is that wealth is measured in what is given away rather than in what is hoarded. It is measured in generosity of spirit rather than in self-preservation. Thus, God’s economy is counter-cultural; lacking in logic. It flies in the face of what is reasonable. It can be understood only through the eyes of faith.

One of the reasons I love this church so much is that I feel I am surrounded by families who already have a deep grasp of God’s economy, who already experience the deep satisfaction that comes with sharing one’s wealth with one’s neighbors, who already see life through the lens of faith.

Let me introduce you to Oceloa McCarty. An African American woman who dropped out of school at age 10 to help her mother and her aunt with the family laundry business, Oceloa took great pride in a hard day’s work. Using a scrub board and a clothes line and an iron, she worked magic on other people’s dirty clothes. She was once given an electric washer and dryer, but she soon saw that the washer didn’t rinse adequately to her standards and the dryer turned the whites to yellow. She preferred to wash by hand.

Every week, she took the nickels and dimes and quarters she earned to the bank. All her life, she kept on making those deposits. Arthritis forced her to retire at about age 85. At that time, she had accumulated \$280,000 in her bank account. Thinking about the education she did not receive, she decided to give most of that sum for scholarships to the University of Southern Mississippi for students who might not get to go to college otherwise. Rather than wait until she died, she gave the money right away. In this way, she got to meet all the students who received a scholarship and to tell them her life story. Oceola McCarty lived into God's economy. She was rich toward God. She worked hard, harder than most people; she was a good steward of her income; and when the time came to make a difference in the lives of her neighbors, she wasn't blinded by her own needs. I think of her now as Saint Oeola.

In Luke's parable, we don't know what happened to all the grain in the bigger barns that the farmer had stored up. All we know is that he didn't experience the deep satisfaction that comes with sharing one's wealth for a Godly cause. There is a sadness about that. I believe Jesus told that story so his followers in every century would have the incredible joy that comes with sharing what we've been able to accumulate. The joy is not in the hoarding; it's in the releasing.

This is why I take small groups of church folks to Malawi once a year. We go to my Peace Corps village and we accept invitations to eat in the homes of local villagers. These are people who have precious little to share: a handful of maize flour, a cup of beans, some pumpkin leaves. But they share this precious little with so much joy that the joy becomes contagious! They share what they have because this is how they understand God's hope for them, because this is how they understand the very purpose of life. To be on the receiving end of such hospitality is both humbling and inspiring.

It makes one want to take inventory of what's stored in our barns, and maybe begin to share it. It makes one want to live into God's economy. The next mission trip to Malawi ships out on September 1st!

This Biblical truth is played out in much of our great literature. Charles Dickens gives us Ebenezer Scrooge in his Christmas Carol. Ebenezer is the quintessential tight wad. Won't buy a lump of coal to heat the shop where poor Bob Cratchet labors all day. Won't contribute a dime to the community charities. Wears blinders so all he sees is his own situation. Don't we all LOVE the moment when he wakes from his dream and orders the biggest turkey in the market be delivered to the Cratchet home, and then one generous expression after another! He gets plum giddy as he shares his wealth, as he enters into God's economy! And it's not just his neighbors who are blessed. HE is the one who is transformed! He is the one whose heart is now alive; whose soul is now healthy! Ebenezer Scrooge has become rich toward God!

In the early 1990's, our church took over the High Street School next door. It had been vacant for a decade and the town wasn't ever going to use it again for a school. We negotiated a lease. We agreed to pay for all the renovations which amounted to a little over one million dollars. And the town agreed to a 99 year lease at the rate of one dollar per year. When I shared this news at my home, at the supper table, our then 9 year old son, Russell, disappeared. He returned in a few minutes from his bedroom and presented me with a one dollar bill, saying, "Here's the first year's rent!" I knew how much the one dollar meant to him, but I could see in his face that giving it away meant even more! He is 36 now, a husband and a dad. He continues to astound me with his readiness to share his earnings.

The Gospels can be hard stories for us to read and absorb. They tend to have the effect of upsetting the apple cart. They invite us to look at life through a different lens, to see things from a new perspective.

I imagine Jesus looked around and saw what seemed to be a superficial joy, a surface joy, a joy that really wasn't a joy at all. He saw that his community was missing an essential ingredient; it was missing the economy of God. His neighbors knew all about accumulating wealth. They had yet to discover the joy of investing that wealth in the hopes and dreams of their neighbors. Thus, the invitation to be rich toward God.

I don't know how much longer I will live. It could be one more day; it could be twenty more years! My aim is to die a wealthy man, and that my wealth will be measured by what I have released to the world community. Having this aim in mind is what allows any of us to remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.