

Living the Abundant Life
Isaiah 55: 1-5; Matthew 13: 44-46
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I. Introduction

Ms. O'Leary's cat Ethel dies, so she goes to her pastor and asks if they can hold a funeral in the church. Well, her minister, in as gentle and pastoral a way as he can, declines to do a funeral, explaining that it would be quite unheard of and that it would upset the members of the congregation, and could even get him in trouble with the District Superintendent.

Ms. O'Leary is very disappointed, and as she gets up to leave, she says, "that's really too bad, because I was planning on making a \$100,000 gift to the church in Ethel's honor." Whereupon, the pastor jumps up from his desk and says, "Why Ms. O'Leary, why didn't you mention that Ethel was a church member?"

People sometimes (and sometimes appropriately) get a little cynical when preachers start talking about money. The fact is that preachers don't always do it with integrity, and when they do, the reaction from the pews is so often defensive that a lot of preachers shy away from the topic. But when we do that, we do our parishioners a grave disservice, because stewardship is at the very heart of the process of growing in discipleship. I believe that one of the reasons that our denomination has been dying for 40 years is because we have not been addressing the importance of stewardship head on.

Today is the final Sunday in our annual stewardship campaign, which we have entitled "Thy Kingdom Come," after the petition in the Lord's Prayer. And we're going to look today at how our giving and the coming of the Kingdom are linked.

II. Proclaiming the Kingdom

Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God over 100 times throughout the Gospels; it is the very heart of his message. In just this 13th chapter of Matthew alone, he tells seven different parables about what the Kingdom of God is like, two of which are our Gospel lesson this morning. And these two stories illustrate why this whole idea of the Kingdom of God is so hard for us. They're the stories of two people who are going about their daily lives, when they stumble upon something whose value dwarfs everything else that they possess. And that's good news! When we experience the in-breaking of the Kingdom, everything else vanishes (in terms of its importance).

But then the hard part is that we give up everything else of value that has shaped our lives up until that point. So we have this tremendously challenging paradox of finding the only thing that gives our lives meaning, but having to surrender all the things that we thought gave us meaning to get it.

Now Isaiah highlights the most difficult expression of this paradox: that we spend most of our time and effort laboring for things that don't – and can't – give us life. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” asks the prophet. And the irony, of course, is that the very thing that *does* satisfy is free. God's grace, which is without price, is given without price. “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price,” he invites us. Isaiah's words are a promise of abundance, and abundance that only comes from life in God.

All of us wrestle with the tendency to define ourselves by what we own or have, or define our value by what we earn. We use our money to insulate ourselves from an uncertain world. We collect and save as a way of comforting ourselves that we are not vulnerable. We try and fill the spiritual void in our lives – a void that can only be filled by God – through retail therapy. And we all know that buying things never satisfies us for more than a moment – which not only doesn't work, but prevents the thing that we need -- but we keep doing it. That fits Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

And that's where stewardship helps us. There's a story about a cabin on the side of a mountain that was virtually buried in a severe snow storm one winter. A Red Cross rescue party drove into the foothills of the mountain as far as their vehicles would take them, and then set out hiking the rest of the way with relief supplies.

After an arduous journey, the relief team finally made it to the cabin and banged on the door, shouting, “It's the Red Cross.” A voice on the inside answered, “It's been a pretty hard winter, and I don't think that we'll be able to donate this year.” Stewardship is the voice outside the door of the cabin of our consumerism, calling us to step out and experience abundant life.

III. Abundance through Giving

For exactly this reason, John Wesley saw good stewardship as the salvation of the Methodist movement. About a year and a half before he died, Wesley wrote a powerful little essay called *Thoughts on Methodism*. At this point, his Methodist movement was thriving (at least in terms of numbers), and he starts the essay saying, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”

He goes on to say, “I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must *necessarily* produce both industry and frugality. And these cannot but produce riches, But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.... “

“Is there no way to prevent this? This continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal. We *must* exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can – that is, in effect to grow rich! What way then can we take that our

money may not sink us to the nethermost of hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who *gain all they can*, and *save all they can*, will likewise *give all they can*, then the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.”

Stewardship is the process of breaking the grip that our materialism has on us and opening us up to experience the free and priceless abundance that God has to offer us. And the good news is that just getting started on healthy giving begins the process of opening us up. There’s an interesting twist when you listen closely to today’s lesson, particularly the second parable. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man in search of fine pearls...”

Pearls were of enormous value in the ancient near east; they were the equivalent of diamonds in today’s culture. But notice, Jesus doesn’t say that the Kingdom of God is the pearl. He says that the Kingdom is like a man *in search of* fine pearls. In other words, it’s enough for us to start to engage this discipline for it to be life changing. The Pearl of Great Price, may be the ultimate goal – the Kingdom in its final consummation – but it’s the quest that is where the Kingdom of God happens here and now.

We don’t even have to *find* the pearl to succeed; we have to be searching, we have to be trying. The great theologian Howard Thurman, who was Dean of the Chapel at Howard University, said, “The task of those who work for the Kingdom of God is to WORK for the Kingdom of God. The result is not in their hands. He who keeps his eyes on results cannot give himself wholeheartedly to his task, however simple or complex that task may be.”

Our call as Christians is to work for the Kingdom, and in working for it, make it a reality in our own lives. Now that’s not easy; most of us, I suspect, feel much like Henny Youngman, when he said, “I’ve got all the money I’ll ever need, if I die by 4:00.” But the reality is that most of us actually have all the money we need; we just need to reprioritize, or at least start the process of reprioritizing.

Like most of you, my wife Jeannine and I give to a variety of charities as well as to church. But we’re making an \$11,000 pledge to our stewardship campaign this year. Now, I hesitate to share that number that nakedly, because it can come across as self-aggrandizing, which is not at all my intention (in reality, the amount is probably too modest, and I’m sure that John Wesley would be disappointed). But I share it because I think that it’s important to start to break the culture of secrecy that we have around money; and because that amount represents a stretch for us, and I want you to know that we take this process seriously as well as wanting you to. Stretching is what makes giving healthy and starts us down that path that is the Kingdom of God.

IV. Conclusion

One of my favorite theologians, Walter Wink, wrote that “The early church did not seek to formulate a theory of illness; instead, it healed the sick. It did not attempt to explain how the demonic could exist in a good world made by a good God; instead, they cast out demons. They

had no hypotheses about how prayer works. They simply prayed.... Their attitude was not anti-rational or anti-theological, but merely concrete. They looked, not for adequate ways to conceptualize the Kingdom, but for ways to actualize it.”

Our stewardship is one of the most profound ways that we actualize the Kingdom of God. It is a gift that God gives us to open our eyes and to see the world in new ways. It is how we start to give up “labor[ing] for that which does not satisfy,” and claiming the priceless gift of God’s grace that is offered without price. “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’”

Amen.