

A stewardship sermon, in the middle of July?

Well, I certainly didn't come back from vacation thinking: "You know what this church needs? A good rousing reason to be reminded of the need to support the church, with finances, with time, with the gifts God enabled us to use." No, it was actually these texts.

It is most obvious in the parable Jesus tells in Luke's gospel. Jesus takes a fairly point-blank approach with the story he chooses to tell. A farmer has an overabundant harvest and doesn't have the right storage facilities to hold it all. Locked into how he can hold onto all that he has, and increase his net worth, he decides to tear down his current storage units in order to build bigger ones. His dreams are of wealth and all of the benefits that come with it – namely the ability to live at ease; to eat, drink, and enjoy!

On all those who were salivating over this story, Jesus throws a bucket of ice water; when the well-to-do soul learns from the character of a disappointed God, that he only has a short time to live and will not be able to enjoy his riches as he had planned.

As one who had a brush with cancer four years ago, I can tell you sometimes it takes such a kick in the pants to be reminded to make the most out of life while we have it. The same may be true for us as we witness the preponderance of random acts of shooting. So perhaps this story can serve as a cautionary tale to start today living life to the full.

But I'm going to return to the question Jesus fielded that garnered Jesus' response: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

The NRSV has Jesus respond this way: "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

I kind of like the approach the Common English translation gives, as I add my own voicing to it: Jesus said to him, "Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?" As if Jesus couldn't believe the stuff people were wanting him to address....

But he takes it on anyway. And I believe his parable ultimately does respond to the man's query with a reminder that should his brother share the inheritance, the one desiring the share might think about how he chooses to use his own share of the wealth. None of Jesus' responses allow anyone to point at someone else and say, "See I told you so!" No, Jesus allows us to say "See?," but with the caveat that we also need to consider our own behavior, lest we be hypocritically blind to the ways we act similarly to those about whom we complain. N'est pas?

As the Apostle Timothy was making working his way around the Mediterranean sharing stories about Jesus, he must have been familiar with this parable, as there is a saying in the sixth chapter of 1 Timothy that goes like this:

17 Tell people who are rich at this time not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. 18 Tell them to do good, to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others / *maintain community*.* 19 When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life.

*The adjective *koinonikos* in verse 18 connotes community and communication and generosity in community. - trans Wilda C. Gafney, in *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church (Year W)*, p215

This is what I believe Jesus was getting into with the parable he told. In reality, the subject of the story actually had ample storage for holding onto what he grew, he just wasn't thinking about anyone else. There were plenty of options other than having to build bigger storage units. Had he taken the time to consult his community about *its* challenges, the *koinonia* could have worked together to decide the best uses for the overabundance. It would seem that in Jesus' parable it is the self-centeredness of the man that creates "poverty" in God, and instead, had he made a community-based decision on the blessings that the earth produced that year, he would have been, as Jesus concluded the parable, "rich toward God." Or, as Timothy puts it "sharing with others / maintaining community ...(is the) way to take hold of what is truly life."

This is the literal definition of a “philanthropist,” right? Coming from the Greek for *lover of humanity*. And I dare say if we include things like our planet, the land, the seas, the creatures thereon and within, we might extend the definition to a *lover of others*. The importance I glean (yep, that’s called foreshadowing folks), the importance I glean from these texts is the attention we are called by God to give to others. To get outside of only caring for me or what’s mine, and actually having love and concern for others—joining together with others to increase their life (our lives)...their well-being (our well-being)...goes a long way towards being rich towards God.

So, our last text also follows this line of thinking. There’s a lot going on in the story of Ruth and Naomi, I know last week Gene dug into some of the issues it raises. And there are MANY directions one could go with the text Donna read today. However, I want us to look at it from the point of view of how philanthropy is exhibited in the text.

When they were in Moab, Naomi and her daughters-in-law formed a community wrapped in the shared suffering of loss. The deaths of their respective husbands—and Naomi’s sons—bonded them. With no men to give them social standing, all they had was each other. It was that bond that gave Orpah and Ruth permission to make their own choice about how the next chapter of their lives would be written. Of course, Orpah chose to stay in Moab, and Ruth chose to go with Naomi to the land of Judah. With nothing of material worth, these women shared with one another the capital of

grace, compassion, empathy, and agency. Exhibit A of a type of philanthropy :: love toward one another.

Alone together, Naomi and Ruth try to sort out how they will live. Thanks to the middle eastern practice of hospitality, women of little means—particularly widows—were able to glean produce from what workers left in the fields. Although from the permissions given by Boaz it appears that this was not a safe way for women—especially immigrant women—to collect food: “I have ordered the young men not to assault you,” Boaz tells Ruth, after she has worked a full day. At this stage, that is Ruth’s philanthropy: her drive to work in order to support her small community.

It is Ruth’s beNEficence that opens Boaz’s eyes and heart toward her: “Everything that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband’s death has been reported fully to me,” Boaz tells her. “How you left behind your father, your mother, and the land of your birth, and came to a people you hadn’t known beforehand. 12 May the Lord reward you for your deed. May you receive a rich reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you’ve come to seek refuge.”

With that blessing Boaz gives Ruth access to additional food and water; as well as an introduction to the “God of Israel;” another vital portion of philanthropy. Do you see? Faith is a gift we all hold within us – something to be shared with others; that it may fall into their lives as a blessing at just the right moment.

***(Wait, how did this Stewardship sermon
just turn into an Evangelism sermon??
What's going on here?!?)***

Ruth responds in turn to Boaz's kindness:

13 She said, "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, sir, because you've comforted me and because you've spoken kindly to your female servant—even though I'm not one of *your* female servants."

It is this *kindness* that opens the door for a promising future for Ruth, and Naomi, as they will be drawn even deeper into Boaz's community – this, we will get into in more detail next week. For now, let us remember just what an act of philanthropy kindness can play. I especially call out those who engaged in the book study "In Defense of Kindness" to recall all the stories that were shared for how acts of kindness, big or small, whether given or received, positively affected us. Indeed, being kind to friends and strangers alike is a way of becoming rich toward God.

It is through our own *koinonikos* (that is, care for community), that we nurture our richness in God. As a nascent union, we—Lyndhurst Community of Faith—are still growing into knowing one another, and we need to realize that is going to take some time. Ruth and Naomi are prime examples for how relationships grow and mutate over time, and based on life circumstances. Right now we are in a similar stage of when they were brought together through marriage – getting used to each other's idiosyncrasies, learning one another's origin stories, discovering some of the things we assume about one another aren't the way we really are – those

kind of fun relationship-building blocks. So right now our philanthropy toward one another is through trusting our traditions; it is having faith that our common future can be bright as we strive toward following Jesus together; it is taking the risk to share with one another what really matters to us and investing in what our community—inside and outside the church—cares about.

Given time and patience, and collective experiences that we have together, we will have a better sense of the present and future we are being called to build together. And as we build out from this point on, with the intent “to do good, to be abundant in the good things we do, to be generous, and to share with others / maintain community,” then we will indeed go a long way in becoming rich toward God. Thanks, indeed, to the one from whom all blessings flow. Amen.