

Sermon, 2 September 2007—Proper 17

Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8; Luke 14:1,7-14

Luke is uniquely sensitive to the issues of unevenly distributed wealth within the Christian community. It might surprise us to realize that this was a pervasive problem in the congregations of early Christianity. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, denounces the crammed picnic baskets that certain so-called saints brought to the Eucharistic meal, which they distributed only among their friends and family as they got drunk on what was meant to be communion wine. James attacks church ushers who have premium seats for the rich and offer the floor to the poor, and he condemns congregational indifference to the survival needs of the poor so scathingly it will peel your teeth. The Sunday of Labor Day weekend is probably not a bad Sunday to recall these things, as, in today's Gospel, Luke plucks on this particularly raw nerve in his congregation.

Taken as a whole, Luke's message about the obligation of wealthy Christians to care materially for their impoverished brothers and sisters builds up in his Gospel and accumulates in the Book of Acts. Not only does Jesus repeatedly warn against greed, he finally finds the perfect disciple in Zacchaeus, who redistributes all he has gained unjustly and more. Luke's picture of the Christian community God called into existence in Jerusalem after Jesus' Resurrection is Edenlike. Jesus' followers were "of one heart and soul," Luke tells us, "and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." In this new Creation, as in the original garden, everything necessary for life is provided; radical generosity and heartfelt gratitude are woven together spontaneously, so that love and praise pour out from everyone continuously.

Today, though, let's not consider Christian economics, but Jesus' unsettling words. Only in the Gospel of Luke does Jesus give this shrewd advice—so shrewd it is disconcerting: to serve the poor out of self-interest. That seems counterintuitive, contradictory, even a potential set-up for bad faith. These words, though, come early in Luke's ongoing campaign of advocacy for economic justice. He knows his crowd and understands that, if he is going to persuade the reluctant, his initial arguments must appeal to their self-interest. He also knows that, ultimately, behavior matters more than motivation. That seems unsettling, too, doesn't it? Luke, sophisticated Gentile that he is, sees that it is better to do the right thing for the wrong reason, than not to do the right thing at all. Parents and teachers have to learn this if they are going to survive; most presidents and statesmen understand this. Of course, the ideal is to do the right thing for the right reason—if you believe that is possible, then the Gospel of Matthew is the one for you. But it is disconcerting how often, when doing the right thing for the right reason becomes impossible, doing the wrong thing for the right reason quickly seems to be OK, especially to preachers and politicians.

Luke prefers to have you do the right thing for the wrong reason, trusting that the value of the right thing will become apparent to you over time. Luke, you see, has his eye on our common life, on the commonwealth of the congregation, if I can put it that way. None of us can guarantee the internal life of the members who sit next to us. The history of Protestantism is the melancholy tally of the inevitable self-defeat that comes when we insist that all personal convictions must conform to pure doctrinal claims. That leads only to congregations splitting off from each other. That is the public and corporate form of the psychosis which insists that I must find someone who will reflect my internal reality back to me perfectly and that I

will only enter into a partnership with someone indistinguishable from myself. The deep catholicity of the church is the affirmation that the stranger has a place here, that the miscreant can hope to be embraced and welcomed for the sake of what we can be together, that what is offered is open to all. For this, a certain courtesy and care and kindness is crucial.

We must, if we are to live together, begin to form in each other and in those we are responsible for the good habits that will enable us to trust each other, to thrive together, to discover the virtues of virtue. It is no accident that Anglicans recall that Queen Elizabeth I, imposing uniformity of public religious practice, forbade inquisition of personal spiritual consciences. “God did not give me eyes,” she said, “to look into men’s souls.” The Puritans, in her day and in ours, eager to do the wrong thing for the right reason, as eager to set up entrance exams as they are insistent on expulsion procedures, find that position irresponsible and weak. Those who are honest with themselves, those who sit down at the same humble table with strangers, those who know that we are all in this together, who know that “we must love one another or die,” are quite ready to do, as Luke suggests, the right thing for the wrong reason, particularly when doing nothing is as false and destructive as doing something wrong.

So what does Luke recommend as the right thing to do? He takes his stand on the ancient injunctions of the Torah: welcome the stranger, care for the widow and the orphan, restore what you have taken from the poor in pledge, provide for the hungry at your harvest, and love your neighbor as yourself. These are the irreducible and uncompromising demands God made in choosing to make the Hebrew people his own. If they are to be God’s people, then they are to remember that they were strangers in Egypt, from which God brought them out, and not to oppress and to humiliate strangers

in their own land. They are not to reap a field to its edge, but to leave a portion so that those who have no field can come and glean a living. They are to release the debts that cannot be paid back in seven years and even to return land to the original landholding family every fifty years. So Luke has Jesus urge those listening to him to do what they know God enjoins them to do: feed the poor, welcome the stranger, serve others.

Now, notice that none of this has to do with doctrines or emotions, but with acting as God acts. It is that simple and flat. I show I am loyal to God by how I imitate God. I feed others in order to display that the God I serve feeds his Creation. I remit the debts of others to demonstrate that I believe in a forgiving and restoring God. I welcome the stranger to broadcast that the God I have been received by welcomes all, because no one is a stranger to God. I love my neighbor to prove that I trust a God who is loving. I give action priority over feeling and belief because God did not dream a world to delight in, but created a world to act in. Actuality is the only means we have of coming to know God and of making God known. Actuality is God's own chosen vehicle, in fact, for us who are flesh.

Not only that. In Luke's day, as in ours, the social obligation of hospitality was reciprocity: households returned invitations to each other, releasing the obligation, restoring the balance, weaving and securing the relationship. So Luke has Jesus make the shrewd comment that, if God considers the most powerless and marginalized to be God's own—as the Psalmist calls God “Father of orphans and defender of widows”—if these particularly are the members of God's household, then God will fulfill the obligation of reciprocity on the last day, when the feast you will be invited to will be the banquet of Paradise, the wedding supper of the Lamb, whose appetizer is our Eucharist.

In our own day, that may not be a plausible and persuasive argument; but we know that to act as Luke recommends, whatever our motivation, brings unexpected rewards. This, over and over, has been the surprised reaction of the members of this congregation who have gone to help prepare the meal at Place of Hope—what seems drudgery or duty results in an affirmation of kindness towards each other, especially those who have no resources of their own, in the slow arising of compassion, and even in a more tender and appreciative look at our own life. It seems one doesn't have to wait for the Last Judgment to begin to discern how God rewards those who do good, that is, how God gives us eternal life. When we have actually extended ourselves for another—if we have been able to do that without resentment or cynicism—something very evanescent, very tenuous, very fragile, very faint, begins to collect in us, something like dew, that refreshes and restores, but quickly dries off, something like a movement glimpsed only with the corner of the eye, but which we cannot locate if we turn and stare at the spot where we thought it was. As with happiness, you can't build it by will power; you can only notice it as it happens, and often you only notice it as it begins to fade. A similar quality hovers around goodness: you can't build it by will power, but only notice the warmth left over when you have done the next right thing, and let that go with your own sigh of gratitude that goodness is in fact possible. I am hard put to know what to call this: it may be gratification, because that is not far from graciousness and gratitude. This is, if we can let it be, the life of the blessed.

The necessary corollary is to realize that to act for the reward defeats itself. To think we are going to change the other person or get something of our own back or secure an advantage for future negotiation—none of that works. That is always the danger of doing the right thing for the wrong

reason. That may be why Luke said our rewards will only be in the next life, so that we do not apply the rule of instant gratification to acts of kindness in this life as well. Luke is trying to lure his readers onto a playing field where they might begin to discover that the game of goodness is worth playing for its immediate enjoyment, not simply in order to win. Augustine of Hippo claimed that the reward of virtue is the virtuous life. So it is: the prize for goodness is being a good person. As the proverb puts it, “virtue is its own reward”—which makes materialists snicker and saints smile.

Luke, though, is gambling on this, trusting it will take root and grow, as Elizabeth did in her own day with the practices of the Anglican Church. Formation is the establishment of a transformed common life through shared faithful practice. Virtues are formed in community by taking on behaviors that characterize them. Not only will you never be generous if you do not do generous acts, you will never know the rewards of generosity, which is to know yourself as generous. The same is true with forgiveness, or patience, or love. And you can never discover those things alone. Just as you cannot watch your own goodness or happiness accumulate, nor enjoy them if you are acting only to get them, so the gradual gathering of a generous forgiving patient loving community happens around us when we consistently and caringly offer that to each other. We build up, actually, the Body of Christ.

We are so made that our peace, our joy and hope, our sense of purpose and meaning, our intuition that we know why we are here—all increase when we act in the ways Luke recommends. Doing that in community, we find ourselves together at home in the universe, beloved children of the Creator, making together what makes life good, already seated at God’s banquet table even before we depart this life to continue at the heavenly feast the delight we have already tasted here, praising the One God forever.