
Giving's End

Luke 12:32-40

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 11, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Roger Owens

Jesus says, "Sell your possession and give alms." And we might be inclined to respond, "We are pragmatic Americans, most of us, and nowhere more pragmatic than when it comes to money. So, if you're going to tell us to sell our possessions and give the money away, it better be worth it. Show us what we're building."

Not long ago I was at a fundraising dinner. Actually, it was a dress-rehearsal for a fundraising dinner for a church that wants to help teenage girls in rural NC living on the margins gain practical job skills and self-confidence. Our job was to listen to a presentation, and give feedback. When the presenter finished his talk—a talk that had a lot of numbers and dates and goals—and asked for suggestions, a man sitting in the back raised his hand. He was a distinguished looking man, bald, bow-tie, suspenders. He looked suspiciously like a dean who might have given a few fundraising talks himself. "This is good information," he began, "but you've got to paint a picture; tell us a story. We need the story of a girl whose life has been transformed by your work. People need to see the human face, the tangible results, before they'll give anything. What is our money going to make happen?"

When we give our money away, we want it to count. We're careful. We research how much of our money goes to an organization's overhead; how much goes to the fundraising consultant; how much is actually helping people. We want to see the architectural renderings of the building, post the picture of the child on the refrigerator, drive by the Habitat house and monitor the progress. It's got to be worth it.

Jesus, we are pragmatists, most of us. If we're going to sell and give, then what are we building? This Kingdom we're building better be good.

This won't be the first time Jesus disappoints the pragmatists, because his little vision of giving has no obvious end. There's no slick brochure to show us what our money will accomplish. Giving *here* looks almost pointless.

This passage from Luke is the way the lectionary divides the assigned reading, and it makes us think these verses about the Father giving the Kingdom and disciples giving alms and making purses are introducing Jesus' encouragement to be watchful, always ready for the Son of Man's unpredictable return. But really they are the *conclusion* of Jesus' well known words about being free from worry that began a few verses earlier: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or your body, what you will wear." Remember those words—how he points to the ravens, and the lilies and the grass—and says, "If all of these are under God's providential care, so are you. So stop striving, cease your vain, anxious seeking. Seek God's Kingdom instead, and the rest will come." And then he concludes with the *beginning* verses from today: "Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms."

Seek God's Kingdom, as most translations put it. Not: build, grow, bring, advance—so many of *our* favorite verbs to describe our relationship to God's Kingdom. Those aren't the Bible's verbs. We are invited to seek the Kingdom, and receive it. It is the Father's good pleasure to *give* the Kingdom, a Kingdom no amount of money can build. God himself is the great philanthropist, here. God is the giver. We seek and receive.

Why, then, sell our possessions and give alms—why charity if the end is not to build God's Kingdom?

What strikes me is the way two of these verses are hinged to one another by the repetition of a single word: give. It's the Father's good pleasure to *give* the Kingdom, Jesus says, and then immediately: Sell your

possessions, and give alms. Jesus takes a Father's-action verb—give—and applies it to us, without any explanation. He just tells us what makes the Father happy: Giving the Kingdom. And then invites giving to characterize our own lives, as if relinquishing possessions and money is the natural way of life for a people who worship a God who, in giving us Jesus and the Spirit, has given us everything we need.

As a little imitation of God, our giving is an end in itself.

"Sell your possessions, give alms." It doesn't aim at something beyond itself. In a sense it's, well, pointless.

In her book *Traveling Mercies* Anne Lamott, who is white, tells about when she first started going to St. Andrews, an African American Presbyterian church in Marin County, California. She was broke, an alcoholic, single, and pregnant. "When I was at the end of my rope," she writes, "the people at St. Andrew tied a knot for me and helped me hold on." When she announced she was pregnant, the congregation cheered for her, and immediately began giving her things: food, clothes, and most importantly the assurance the baby was going to be part of the family.

They also began slipping her money.

She writes about how many of the older women, living close to the bone on small social security checks, would sidle up to her and stuff bills in her pocket. "It was always done so stealthily," she writes, "that you might have thought they were slipping me cocaine." Mary Williams, in her eighties, was one of the most regular donors, giving her plastic baggies full of dimes.

Lamott needed the money. She eventually got over her embarrassment at receiving and learned to say thank you. What she finds remarkable, many years later, is that though her financial situation has changed dramatically—now she's a successful writer with plenty of money—Mary Williams still brings her baggies full of dimes, still slips them discreetly into her pockets, even though she doesn't need them anymore, and even though Williams herself probably does need them. Lamott's situation has changed, but Mary hasn't. Lamott often give the money away or leaves the bags around her house, as reminders of the character of the church she has learned to call home, and the character of the God they worship.

Giving with no obvious end. Sell you possessions, give alms. Not to fulfill a vision, build a kingdom, save a soul. But for no obvious reason, except: it's just *your* way of life because it's *God's* way of life. A little imitation of God.

No *obvious* end. But there might be a not-so-obvious end that matters very much. Selling possessions, giving alms, might be a pathway to a deeper kind of giving.

A few years ago I was in the grocery store and I spotted in the deli section a well-known professor from a distinguished university here in the Triangle. While I was getting a free cookie, I noticed that she was trying the provolone cheese. She took a toothpick and stuck it in a piece of cheese, ate it, then she looked left, then looked right, then picked up a piece of wax paper, stuck her hand in the sample container, grabbed a fist-full of cheese, shoved it in her purse, and walked quickly away.

It's an image that has never left me. Because it's not just a picture of the way we grab, clutch our possessions. It's also a picture of the way we cling to our own lives. The way we clutch and grab, protect and hide our very selves. The problem is this: The lives we cling to so anxiously—the images of ourselves we have manufactured and manicured or the ones others have given to us—they are not our truest selves. They are not the lives the Apostle Paul says are "hidden with Christ in God." *That's* the life God freely gives us, the life we don't need to clutch, the life that is pure gift.

The lives Jesus says not to worry about, these are the lives he says earlier in Luke we need to lose in order to find *real* life. We let go of the lives we fearfully protect and clutch in order to receive the abundant, deep life that is life in God—life it is God's good pleasure to give. But it's hard to even imagine letting go of ourselves when we are still clinging anxiously to our things and our money. So, "sell your possessions, give

alms.” It’s an end in itself, but it also has a deeper end: To get us used to letting go, so we finally might be able to loosen our grip on our own lives.

When we let go of the lives we cling to so anxiously, then we can share our true selves with others like Mary Williams sharing her dimes: without fear of loss. And this kind of sharing is not just an imitation of God, but it’s a sign of our participation in the very life of God, whose life is that eternal Trinity of self-giving love without loss, a love that spills over to us, becomes visible to us, and available to us in the gift of Jesus, God’s Kingdom in a person.

For a number of years I’ve kept a picture of St. Francis on the desk where I pray. I keep it there as a reminder of what God is doing in me and in us: Making us free. It’s a wonderful image of Francis, he’s leaping into the air, his hands up and out in joy, reaching perhaps to the God who is his life, undoubtedly he’s in song. He’s light. He’s not burdened by possessions. And it’s clear from his posture that his own life is a gift—a gift he has received, a gift he can freely share. It’s a picture for me of what salvation looks like.

But I know Francis didn’t start that way. He started as someone who had a romantic image of himself. He hungered for fame, glory and chivalry. That was a life he eventually had to lose. He also became, very briefly, a pragmatic seller of possessions. Praying once in a church, he heard Jesus speak to him from the crucifix: “Francis, do you see that my house is in ruins. Go and restore it for me.” Francis took Jesus literally, and set out to rebuild that church building. He didn’t call a fundraising consultant. He went straight to his dad, a wealthy fabric merchant, and stole several bolts of fabric from his father, sold them, and used the money to repair the church. Though we pragmatic Americans might praise Francis’s ingenuity, daddy Pietro didn’t see it that way, and put out an APB for his son. After a few weeks of hiding, Francis presented himself to the Bishop, who told him in no uncertain terms that he must restore the money to his father. Reports say that there was air of calm about Francis; like he was a new man somehow after his months of hiding. He stood up in front of the Bishop, the bystanders, and his Father and said: “Up to this time I have called Pietro Bernardone father, but now I am the servant of God. Not only the money but everything that can be called his I will restore to my father, even the very clothes he has given me.” And he tore off his clothes down to his undergarments, piled them in a heap on the floor, tossed the money on top of them, received the bishops blessed and went out into the world. G. K. Chesterton describes the moment: “He went out half-naked into the winter woods, walking the frozen ground between the frosty trees; a man without a father. He was penniless, he was parentless, he was to all appearances without a trade or a plan or a hope in the world; and as he went under the frosty trees, he burst suddenly into song.”

He gave up his possessions. He gave away his money. But he lost more than that. He lost his life. The false image of himself as a nobleman’s son—the life symbolized by his last name and his clothes. He lost that life. But he gained life, too—true life. A life of freedom, a life in God. A life that could be freely shared—which he spent the rest of his life doing. A life of joy. He gained the freedom evident in the picture I keep on my desk.

So can we. And, yes, it’s worth it. Amen.