

WHAT CAN WE SHARE?

Pentecost 11 – Cycle C: Luke 12:13-21

I once asked a lawyer how many of the families he sees fight with each other during the settling of an estate. “Oh,” he said quietly and with impeccable timing, “it’s only about 90 per cent.” As a pastor, I know that grief often causes people who generally have no difficulty in their relationships with others to say things and do things they would otherwise not say and do. I also know that the estate of a loved one is often used to address long-felt injustices in the family circle: how the estate is settled usually has more symbolic value than monetary or material value. I can’t say that I blame Jesus for deflecting the request of the younger brother in today’s Gospel – a request to have Jesus advocate for relaxing the inheritance laws. The laws clearly favoured the older brother, giving him a double share of the proceeds; and the younger brother knew this. He probably thought he could turn Jesus’ concern for the underdog to his advantage. But Jesus, we see, is no doormat; and his interpretation of greed as the younger brother’s motive, is, most likely, accurate. Even if he’s wrong, and grief is a factor, it’s an important lesson for the younger brother and for all of us, for that matter, to hear.

It is so easy for us to be seduced by things, by the drive to own and possess and accumulate. We equate security and happiness with abundance, when the truth is that we can be just as secure and happy by living simply – perhaps more so. Jesus says as much in the parable of the rich man. He pulled down all his barns and built larger ones to store all his grain and goods. And he features himself heaving a huge sigh of relief that he has mastered, so to speak, the life question. “Now I can relax,” he says to himself, “eat, drink, and be merry.”

“What about *your* life?” Jesus asks through God’s entry into the action of the parable. “You can’t take it with you, and, in fact, do not all your possessions really possess you and, in a sense, lay claim to your life? How can anyone be rich toward God while being so invested in oneself? in comfort, pleasure, and ease?”

Paula and I had a close-up view earlier this summer of people who are (or perhaps were) similar to the rich man in the parable. We visited a few stately homes in both England and Scotland, curious to see for ourselves what the top stratum of the British class system looked like.

As you might expect, we saw beautiful buildings and grounds, beautiful living quarters, richly appointed with art and furniture, silver, crystal, and complete sets of hand-painted china for every occasion. Some places, such as Brodick Castle on the Island of Arran, have been taken over by the National Trust; other places, such as Blenheim Castle and Inveraray Castle have had to open their doors to tourists in order to survive. Present-day owners who have old money and precious little new money are clinging to their past at a high personal cost. And, we were able to see as we looked at family trees, how desperately they clung to power, privilege, and wealth, even during the glory days of centuries gone by. If wives and husbands had ever loved one another, it was incidental: marriages were strategically planned and arranged for the purpose of safeguarding and amassing fortunes. As Jesus taught in today’s gospel, our possessions have the capacity to possess us; to take away life, not give it.

In contrast, is a world-changer named Scott Neeson. Some of you may recognize his name as the former president of Twentieth Century Fox. He was born in Edinburgh, but emigrated to Australia at age five. As a young man, he launched a successful career in the film business by forming a company that operated drive-in theatres in Australia. He quickly climbed the ranks of the film industry in Australia and then took a position with Twentieth Century Fox in Los Angeles. Later, as president, he oversaw the releases of blockbusters such as *Titanic*, *Braveheart*, *Independence Day*, *X-Men*, the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, and over 100 other films. Ten years ago, he left Twentieth Century Fox to take up a new position at Sony Pictures Entertainment. Before going to Sony, however, he took a brief sabbatical in Southeast Asia during which he visited Phnom Penh’s Steung Meanchey toxic dump, a visit which ultimately changed his life.

In 2004, Scott left Hollywood and moved to Cambodia to establish the Cambodian Children’s Fund. His initial goal was to handle the needs of 45 children he met at the dump site. Today, his Cambodian Children’s Fund serves almost 900 children with six facilities in Phnom Penh.

Steung Meanchey is a part of Phnom Penh that has low-income neighborhoods and slums. The dump itself covers about 100 acres. It is flanked by private property on which rubbish pickers build makeshift huts and are charged extortionate rents by landowners. Roughly 2,000 people, about 600 of which are children, live and work there.

The dump is nicknamed “Smoky Mountain” because of the miasma of smoke that the dump constantly gives off. It is literally on fire; the waste creates methane as it rots and the methane burns. In monsoon season and throughout much of the rest of the year, the surrounding area is swamped and the children live and play in fetid water.

Most of the rubbish pickers at Steung Meanchey are either from Phnom Penh or came to Phnom Penh looking for work and ended up in the slums. Many of the approximately 600 children have parents or relatives who also work on the dump and look after them. Some of them go to school, but most do not - at least not on a regular basis - and it is safe to say that without intervention virtually none of them ever completes a primary school education. The school fees are too high and their families need them to collect rubbish to contribute to the family income. Adults earn, on average, \$1 to \$1.25 a day; children earn about half that amount. A whole family working together can actually earn more money than they could in the rural village from which they originally came.

The Cambodian Children’s Fund provides education, nourishment and healing for children and their families. Scott uses his connections in the UK and the United States to provide special opportunities for the children. Most of his time, however, is devoted to doing daily fieldwork and overseeing the operations of the CCF.

What Scott recognized in 2003 was that his fame, fortune, and success did nothing for an emptiness he felt in his soul. He asked himself, “Why do I...not feel happy when I am at this high point in my career?” Recognizing the great need at the Steung Meanchey dump site provided the answer. He says, “It is the desire to know why we are here, and what we are supposed to do with our lives [that I needed an answer for].” Scott found spiritual fulfillment by moving to Cambodia and establishing the Cambodia Children’s Fund.*

Jesus’ parable would have shocked his original audience. In their world and culture, it was taken for granted that a year in which there was a bumper crop meant that there would be enough to share with those who were poor. It would have been normal for the rich man to say to himself, “I’ll store this for those who will need it.” Instead, of course, he stores it for himself.

Jesus tells this parable because we all have some wealth; some part of who we are in which there is a kind of bumper crop. Even if we do not have an abundance of money, we have other gifts that are not meant to be kept for ourselves – gifts of leadership, wisdom, ability, humour, hospitality, vision, skills, patience, caring, compassion, companionship, music, advocacy – the list is probably endless.

Today’s Gospel addresses our wealth; gifts that we have received by the grace of God. The Gospel doesn’t ask, “What can we hoard?” Rather, it asks “What can we share?” How can we live in such a way that we can be rich toward God?

The three questions on the worship supplement are our homework. They allow us to go deeper with the question “What can we share?” If you would like to discuss the first two in Roy Grosz Hall after the service, I’ll be happy to join you, reflect on our discussion, and take notes. The third question really is yours to take home and ponder.

What gifts do we have as a church that we can share with others? What gifts do we have individually that we can share with our church? What gifts do we have individually or as a family that we can share with others?

What can we share?

*Information on Scott Neeson was taken from “From Hollywood to Cambodia” by Princess Soma Norodom in *Seasons of the Spirit* SeasonsFUSION, Pentecost 1, 2013. Copyright © Wood Lake Publishing Inc. 2012. Used by permission.

Information on the Steung Meanchey Dump Site is posted on
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/macieidakowicz/sets/386746/>