

Everything Is Gift

The parable that Luke shares with us today is rooted in the biblical concept that we are expected to use the gifts that God has provided us with justice. What is remarkable about this slant on the Gospel is that it makes no difference what we have, how much or how little--no matter what wealth, what talent, what resources--we must use these gifts for some good beyond ourselves. Jesus proposes that we disciples be as clever and as enterprising as those who are immersed in the ways of the world.

Perhaps the best place to start is to begin to understand just how blessed we are. A friend of mine, once a diocesan priest now married and a pastor of a local United Church of Christ, shared the following with me some years ago when he was ministering in the Cleveland Diocesan Mission in El Salvador. I wanted to know what daily life was like for the people in his El Salvador parish and for so many of the poor throughout the Third World. This is what he wrote to me:

- + *Take out all the furniture in your home except for one table and a couple of chairs. Use blankets and pads for beds.*
- + *Take away all of your clothing except for your oldest dress or pair of pants, shirt or blouse. Leave only one pair of shoes.*
- + *Empty the pantry except for a small bag of flour, some sugar and salt, a few potatoes, some onions, and a dish of dried beans.*
- + *Dismantle the bathroom, shut off the running water, and remove all the electrical wiring in your house.*
- + *Take away the house itself and move the family into a tool shed.*
- + *Cancel all subscriptions to newspapers, magazines, and book clubs. This is no great loss because now none of you can read anyway.*
- + *Move the nearest hospital one hundred miles away and put a midwife in charge instead of a doctor.*
- + *Throw away your bankbooks, stock certificates, pension plans, and insurance policies. Leave the family a cash hoard of ten dollars.*
- + *Give the head of the family a few acres to cultivate on which to raise a few hundred dollars of cash crops, of which one third will go to the landlord and one tenth to the money lenders.*
- + *Lop off twenty-five or more years in life expectancy.*

In the face of those harsh realities, I wanted to counter that we in the First World earned what we have by developing a political-economic system that allowed us to amass all our twenty-first century perks. But I quickly realized that that wouldn't wash, because EVERYTHING IS GIFT! Hopefully, that realization will eventually lead to find creative ways to use our gifts to profit the Reign of God. We have to understand that the disparity we see in wealth between us and the Third World could not possibly be the will of an all loving and compassionate God.

I know this is challenging. I find it hard to acknowledge the evidence that 25% of the world's population (we're in there somewhere) controls and uses 80% of the world's resources. That's the really uncomfortable truth about our modern, high-tech world, which seems to be in direct opposition to the vision of the Son of God. Today he is asking us yet again to use the intelligence and faith, given to us as pure gift, to be as enterprising as that dishonest servant in the parable.

Perhaps the following suggestions might reflect the bare minimum degree of creativity Jesus is looking for in addressing the issues raised by his parable as well as the crisis of poverty in our cities and around the world. None of these suggestions will break anyone here:

First, each day pray for the poor and pray for all those ministering to the poor here and abroad.

Second, each week, in your own way, pick a day to consciously experience hunger, perhaps by fasting or by eating only half of what you would normally eat.

Finally, once a month take a poor person grocery shopping with you, by giving what you spend on one family member to your local food bank, Food for the Poor, Catholic Relief Services or the American Red Cross.

The parable Jesus offers us in the dishonest steward is not just a clever story. Just in case his disciples missed the point, Jesus summed it up for them and us with:

*"No servant can serve two masters
He will either hate one and love the other,
or be devoted to one and despise the other.
You cannot serve both God and mammon."*

It's time to choose.