

A FRAGRANCE FILLS THE HOUSE

Texts on Sunday, November 24, 2013

John 12: 1-8; 2 Corinthians 9: 1-12

The apostle Paul was a good fund-raiser. In this part of his letter to the Corinthians, he was encouraging them to take part in a campaign underway in all the new churches of the Mediterranean. He called the campaign “the ministry to the saints.” Can’t you see the four-color posters? The goal was to bring a big gift of money to Jerusalem to support the mother church. Now, Paul had had a serious fight with that mother church some time back as to whether God’s promises covered Christians who weren’t Jews. Jerusalem said No, they don’t. Paul said Yes they do—and eventually they were persuaded to support his mission. But surely it did not hurt to bind up the wounds from that dispute with real money. The saints in Jerusalem were poor. The saints in the cities of the empire had plenty. The need of the one and the abundance of others were balanced in acts of generosity.

Paul is brilliant. He is perceptive and practical and persistent. Here he favors them with comparisons to other churches; there he stings them with doubts about their failing zeal, which might embarrass all with a meager gift. Here, as elsewhere in the letter, he has them putting something aside every week. It is a wise counsel. Which of you could give in one week from your income the whole sum you offer in the course of a year? If you can, then your giving is not yet spiritually significant. Paul teaches to give regularly. He calls this practice “being ready.” He teaches giving proportionally, according to means. Then he lightens up. “You must give only as your heart leads you, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Then he pours again and again from the pitcher of spiritual assurance. “God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.”

Brilliant. He ran a good campaign, raised a good sum and got it to Jerusalem. The next fall, I’m sure they asked him to chair the stewardship drive at First Corinthian. No doubt he had to decline. But think about this problem: When the first Corinthians needed to raise money for *their* mission, do you think all they had to do was unroll Paul’s old letter out read it out loud and watch the money flow? And even if that was enough in Year 2, what about Year 3? At some point, words and exhortations and methods just lose gas. If getting giving going was just a matter of reminding you that it’s time for the money to move, then we wouldn’t have campaigns. We wouldn’t even have the word “stewardship.” Why don’t words work? Why is giving money a problem?

The answer goes deep. It's the reason that Jesus speaks of our troubled money-mind only a little less often than of our mind for God. Money matters, but we hardly understand its nature. Some religious teachers speak of an actual god of money, with evil intentions to distort our souls and drive us to base desires which separate us from God. Such talk seems to me too theoretical for our times. Maybe there exists a god of money, maybe not. Does it matter? Either way, it is a fact that we experience intense feelings around money—fears, hopes, cravings. One author calls money “coined personality, so tied to who we are that when we give it, we are giving our selves [and] when we let go . . . we are letting go of part of our selves.” (Richard Foster, *Money, Sex, Power*, p. 43) More than a theory about gods, what matters is how we can become more free from our money—freer in our thought and freer in deed.

Now, the success of Paul's ministry to the saints in Jerusalem does not surprise us. We have seen millions of dollars raised swiftly for ministries to the saints of Indonesia, Pakistan, New Orleans, Haiti, Oklahoma City, and now the Philippines. Disasters generate generosity in ways that our ordinary institutions do not, and there are many reasons for that—but this much we must add. This sudden, lively flow of funds to people in peril helps us feel meaningful for a day, but does not make us generally generous. It does not change our basic nature. We still have intense fears, hopes, and cravings related to money. If our transformation can come, it will not come all at once, but through a process of growing awareness; through practices that prepare us for more than money can buy.

The author Reynolds Price once shared how from the pillows of her deathbed, the mother of his mentor told her son, “I want you to remember: I only regret my economies.” When I heard those five words during a radio broadcast, I knew right then that they would angel me to my grave. *I only regret my economies*. We make economies where we are afraid, where we think there is not going to be enough. Holding back, we try to control the floods of the future. We hold back confession and apology. We hold back conviction. We hold back from taking direct action against oppression and racism. We hold back love and affection. We hold back money. Jesus had a word for our economies. He said that we try to save our lives, and lose them. He said that when we lose our life for love, we gain the kingdom.

In other words, the key to the door of freedom is found in the end. In what we are willing and able to die for, which is what we are willing to live for. Our problem with money is our aimlessness—this general anxiety, from which we rarely stir, that is vaguely afraid of a difficult future, and therefore not focused on our end—our inner aim, the purpose we hold for our life.

In the last decade of her life, my mother passed through a storm of confusion about money. Here was a woman of great faith, my teacher from childhood, trusting and uncomplaining and the victor through astonishing ordeals. When she was about 75, having carefully arranged a place to live out her late years, she was so happy to move to what she hoped would be her last earthly home. Soon, though, the sums she drew from once stout savings exceeded the growth in that pot of money. The prospect of old age poverty terrified her. Being adept with a computer, she came into contact with offers to make her lots of money if she would only . . . You can fill in the blanks. There were so many. She hid what she was doing from her children as much as she could. Ever more anxious about her failing funds, she sometimes lied to us, and then cried to us when her broken word was discovered. She showed more trust to the shyster who aimed to use her than to us who wanted to ease her into a sustainable mode of living. You could say this Christian woman lost her faith—out of fear. But that language is much overused and doesn't explain much. I would rather say that she lost her inner aim—a sense for what her life was for. Faith, after all, is an inner aim.

There is a sweet ending to her story. She crashed through all her savings and had to leave the lovely dwellings with the wood-paneled dining hall for a humble apartment subsidized for seniors with meager means, and no dining hall. Social Security gave her only income, and nothing was left to offer shysters. Her worst fear came to pass—and it was not bad. She found her inner aim again in love and community. Ah! If what you fear does not exist!

Of course many who face terrible money woes have no sweet end like this. We must acknowledge that though Americans love to be occasionally generous for those caught in far-away disasters, as a nation we are stingy with our people in peril. We refuse to see to it that good health care and education and food and safe housing are available as human rights. The root of this disordered use of money is the same for the public as it is for a person. As a people, we have lost our inner aim, our sense of what a human life is for. In the absence of an inner aim, greed is inevitable. In fact, that is what greed is.

When a church struggles to raise money for its ministries, the root is the same. The inner aim is lost. A sense of the true end is not near. More than Paul's exhortations, our feeling for Mary's act of generosity with Jesus can reveal within us a true aim for our life in this body. All the gospels tell a story of a woman who takes costly perfume and anoints Jesus' feet with it and wipes them with her hair. They all tell it a little differently, but they all show that the woman knows that Jesus' death is near. His end, his purpose, his aim is for her so near that she becomes aware of *her* end, *her* aim. She is free. For us to come alive to our inner aim, it is not that we or one we love

must be at the door of death. What is required is that we come free of the illusion of time, that decisions can be made later. We must come into the present moment. Somehow, then, we open to the God-given grace to see ourselves as if through God's eye, and feel that this power is always present to witness ourselves without condemnation. It is a power to see, but not be, our feelings and our fears. It is a power to perceive all things as a gift and know that nothing is ours. And nothing is to lose. And love was our sole aim. To love. To unite what was broken and to free what was frozen.

Then a fragrance fills the house.

O church, your inner aim is love. All the pain and anxiety about money arises in forgetting that our only mission is to love. Detoured from our inner aim, we focus on distrust and power and fear. The only action able to overcome these fears is surrender. When Mary surrendered much money to buy that perfume, a fragrance filled the house. You too: surrender money. When Mary bent to the master's feet, acknowledging the perfect order of love, a fragrance filled the house. You too, O creature, acknowledge your Creator. When she wept for Jesus' death, which perfects love for all who see it, a fragrance filled the house. You too: let compassion flow for all who suffer. When Mary smoothed the ointment on the bare feet soon to be pierced with nails, a fragrance filled the house. When her hair tangled with the oil and his flesh and the floor and the dust, the whole meaning of life on earth was one, and her love offering became eternal. You too: offer up all you are in love.

See this. The aim of your stewardship is not fund-raising. It is soul raising. Enter this house with a gift like hers, asking to be renewed in your feeling for the aim of your life. For your end is near, not far. It is as near as love.

*Gamble everything for love,
If you're a true human being.
If not, leave this gathering!*

*Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty.
You set out to find God, but then you keep
stopping for long periods at meanspirited road houses.*

*Don't wait any longer.
Dive in the ocean,
leave and let the sea be you.
Silent, absent,
walking an empty road,
all praise . . .*

— Rumi