

Being Generous to a Fault

Luke 16:1-13

If you haven't noticed, there's a new and refreshing spirit of grace and compassion emerging from the Vatican these days. Six months into his papacy, Pope Francis has once again demonstrated an evolving change in tone of the largest religious institution in the world in a way perhaps not seen since the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago. On Friday, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York exclaimed on the *Today* show that it was like the church was returning to its roots in Jesus. Imagine that! Headlines around the world: "The Catholic church is unexpectedly acting like Jesus!" Go figure.

What the Pope has done is challenge church policies in a way that has delighted some and upset others. He has taken on the corruption in the Roman Curia. He has forsaken much of the pomp and protocol, normally associated with the Pontificate. He has challenged the venerable institutions of the Church. In an interview published last week, he unabashedly stated that the Catholic church had become "obsessed" with a narrow list of social and moral issues—abortion, homosexuality, and contraception—mostly standing as a staunchly conservative "No!" to the more liberal and utilitarian beliefs of many Protestant denominations and modern societies. Francis told the interviewer:

It is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time. The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. ...We have to find a new

balance, otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. ¹

What it comes down to is Pope Francis is trying to make Catholicism more about helping people than preserving the institutional Church—placing more emphasis on the poor and poor in spirit than on the purity of doctrine. He is seeking a more inclusive and welcoming church instead of a smaller and more doctrinally homogenous one, as his predecessor, Pope Benedict, sought to do. He puts his words into action. When Francis meets the crowds, he embraces the fragile, the poor, the vulnerable, the disabled, the young and the elderly—washing and kissing the feet of juvenile inmates and tenderly holding the hopes of those otherwise forgotten.

The Pope isn't just taking issue with church matters. In the six months that he has been in office, Francis has verbally condemned the “cult of money” and the greed fueling the global financial system, decrying that

The financial crisis which we are experiencing makes us forget that its ultimate goal is to be found in a profound human crisis...We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly human goal. ...If investments in the banks fail, ‘Oh, it’s a tragedy,’...but if people die of hunger or don’t have food or health, nothing happens. This is our crisis today.²

This, from a man who would have an opulent apartment in the papal palace, but has chosen to live in spartan quarters in the Vatican guesthouse, dining daily with the lower-ranking priests and guests who come to the Vatican—who has spurned the luxurious limousine

¹ Laurie Goodstein, “Pope Says Church is ‘Obsessed’ With Gays, Abortion and Birth Control,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2013.

² Rachel Donadio, “Francis’ Humility and Emphasis on the Poor Strike a New Tone at the Vatican,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2013.

of his predecessors for an old Renault station wagon—who has refused to don the customary elegant robes of the papacy in favor of a parish priest’s cassock.

It’s astounding how much of an inspiration this man has become to so many within the Catholic Church and even to millions of non-Catholics around the world (I count myself among them)! In him we see what so many of us affirm and embrace in our Christian faith—humility, compassion, pastoral kindness, and generosity. He is, for many, the embodiment—even the *incarnation*, if you will—of Jesus. Given his role as the spiritual leader for much of Christianity, it says something about what they’ve come to expect if the rest of the world is astonished by this. Again, go figure!

Honestly, if anything, I wish the example and influence of the Pope would filter down to members of the U.S. Congress, especially those who publicly tout their religious credentials as Bible-believing Christians (most of them Protestant). I cannot believe the measure of contempt members of the House seem to have toward the unemployed and working poor of this country when they passed a bill the other day to dramatically cut federal food stamps to nearly four million Americans next year and many more over the next decade—most of whom are single parents, children, and elderly, but it also includes veterans and families of active service personnel. I don’t know about you, but to me this is punitive and mean-spirited, especially since their action comes in the wake of the USDA’s own report

...that 17.6 million households did not have enough to eat at some point in 2012 because they lacked the resources to put food on the table...[and this

vote came] two days after the Census Bureau reported that 15 percent of Americans, or 46.5 million people, live in poverty. ³

So what are low-income and unemployed people to do if we keep cutting assistance? I'm amazed at times at how heartless certain elected leaders can be, especially when you can be sure every one of them will protect their own pay and lavish perks while they make others bear the burden for their policies! Who are they kidding?

I get annoyed mainly because I was brought up with more charitable values, in a home that had a generous spirit even when there was little to go around. Generosity, for me, has always been a cornerstone of my spirituality and faith—that's what I was taught and what I saw modeled. I was thinking about this the other day, having been with my mother who is emptying out her house in upstate New York now that she's sold it. Her example once again spoke to me because, for a woman who accounts for every penny she ever spent, she is remarkably generous and charitable with what she has. Instead of selling a kitchen table and chairs, for example, she gave them to a young couple she didn't know, who were just starting out and needed furniture. She was more concerned about the practical use of it than making any money off it. Much of what she had in the house, she has given to the Town of Speculator's thrift store which, like our Corner Closet, helps out those in need. Some of that is due to the inconvenience of making other arrangements, but a lot of it is reflective of the family's culture over the years. None of us boys begrudged the fact that another was being helped more than us—we weren't (and still aren't) possessive of our parent's possessions.

³ "Another Insult to the Poor," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2013.

I value my upbringing. I learned things that I appreciate now more than I did years ago. My parents, a pastor and a public school teacher, would loan money out without interest on a regular basis, as long as those who were the beneficiaries, including us boys, continued to pay it back—learning both the lessons of generosity and fiscal responsibility. We learned to work hard and volunteer our time and energy to help others. The generosity of spirit was expressed in their hospitality toward people of every status and state in life--as our home was often filled with visitors and guests at Sunday dinner or other times, even when it seemed like we were dividing loaves and fishes. I could go on with endless anecdotes of how my family taught and practiced generosity to each other and to those in need, but honestly, it's really not much different than others of you here. Many of us have been brought up with a spirit of generosity toward others and have been examples of charity to our children and neighbors.

Generosity is central to the norms of our faith. It's not conveyed as a burden or a reluctant duty; instead, it's a joy and a welcomed opportunity to share what we have so that others are helped out and can live more freely. It's a lesson of faith, to be sure, but it's also a fundamental humanitarian value. The Roman philosopher, Seneca the Elder, put it this way: "It is a denial of justice not to stretch out a helping hand to the fallen; that is a common right of humanity."

In times of surplus and scarcity, generosity is what brings people together with a sense of mutual caring and shared sacrifice. It fosters a quality of life that helps you rise above and address the hardships that impact people. In its best spirit, generosity creates

trust and a lightness of heart to the giver while offering relief to the receiver. In my experience, liberality, even to a fault, does far more good for the human soul, spirit, and sense of community than chronic frugality and penny-pinching stinginess ever will. It's not even close.

Jesus, of course, was unequivocal in his appeal for generosity and his condemnation of coldheartedness and callousness, especially toward the poor and suffering—criticizing in particular those who should have known better. Teachings like, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” or parables like the Rich Man and Lazarus, or prophetic actions such as the Feeding of the Multitude—all of which underscored his constant appeal for mutual sharing and taking care of those in need. Even our lectionary text for the day, though a bit unusual and round about in getting there, offers the same message: give generously, even to a fault.

I grant you, in a first reading, the fault isn't hard to spot in the parable of the dishonest manager—a strange story that appears on the surface to be out of line with what Jesus might have said, especially with the morally offensive claim to “make friends...by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes.” It's not the sort of thing we'd expect him to say, or what we'd care to repeat, given that it appears to imply that it is perfectly acceptable to use people for our own interests, as clearly the dishonest manager did.

What we have in this story is an example of self-serving charity—generosity we might actually fault. Except we see this all the time. It actually works well. People donate because they want the benefits of it: tax deductions, name recognition, social respect and

admiration, you name it. Self-serving charity makes everyone involved a beneficiary. In the parable, though, when he knows he's getting fired, the manager figures he can better his outcome by taking advantage of his boss's debtors; he cuts each of them a deal, so they'll owe him a favor when he's out on the streets. On his way out, he made himself a bunch of friends while sticking it to his boss! Jesus' assessment was that it was shrewd, self-serving, and effective—the quintessential “generosity” of a scoundrel!

So, yes, we might be justified in questioning the moral point of the story, except it does make perfect sense. In effect, Jesus was saying, if self-serving dishonest people can calculate the value of money and possessions in terms of getting something in return for themselves, imagine how much more truly generous, self-giving, merciful and compassionate people of faith would view the benefits of giving—that generosity shown, even if its on selfish grounds, is preferable to being too careful, too reluctant, and too stingy giving away possessions and money! That's what I think was Jesus' point. The ultimate value of money and possessions is not in hoarding them for personal gain, but in generously using and sharing them for the benefit of building relationships and alliances with others. As people who can be motivated by great compassion and not merely self-interest, we should be even more conscious of the value of generosity—of what we have to give—even to a fault, erring on the side of liberality instead of stinginess! It should be (and often is) a hallmark of our faith!

And it doesn't just have to do with personal finances and economic policies. This sense of generosity carries over to the

outlook we have on life, i.e., giving people a second chance, giving them the benefit of the doubt, in going the second mile to help someone, etc. A generous spirit is evident in a charitable attitude toward others, characteristic of a person's life—a life dedicated to service, as eloquently expressed in this prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

You recognize that, of course, as the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi from whom the Pope intentionally took his name and witness. Francis of Assisi was a rich, young Italian man in the thirteenth century who forsook his wealth and privileges as the son of a prosperous silk merchant in order to serve the poor and carry the burdens of the forgotten in the name of Christ. He has been a spiritual model and mentor for millions down through the ages, including the inspiration for the words and actions of the new Pope. What an inspirational example for us to study today for what life means and how it can be lived. To choose people over privilege and

possessions; to aspire to a simpler life so you have more to give away; generous to a fault in giving to others—to be an instrument of peace and good will.

If more people lived with this spirit, it would go a long way toward correcting the mean-spirited and selfishness of our times, while lightening the spirits of those who are burdened by the harsh circumstances of their lives. It would bring us together in ways that would simply astound us.

As Pope Francis demonstrates, it's not a matter of dispossessing your life; rather, it's a way to become possessed with a spirit that will enhance your life at whatever state or place you may be. It's to be as generous as Jesus taught us to be. As Cardinal Dolan exclaimed: "To be like Jesus, imagine that!" Imagine that, in this world and in these times! May we not only imagine it, but embrace it, embody it, and fulfill it everywhere we go and with everyone we see!

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
22 September 2013