

Pentecost 9 Lectionary 19 - Sunday, August 7, 2022

Luke 12:32-40

Rev. Paul Sartison

“Make purses for yourselves that will not wear out; an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”

A few weeks ago Jesus told a story about one traveller helping another traveller who'd been mugged and left for dead by the side of the road, and we heard some talk about loving your neighbour as yourself. Then there were two women named Mary and Martha, one caught up in the loving act of hospitality, the other caught up in the loving act of sitting and listening to Jesus. “Loving God with all her heart and mind and strength,” as the commandment goes. Then Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and praying became kind of an act of relying on the mercy and the generosity of God, and last week we heard a story about someone who was too caught up in storing up all the stuff they had, all the grain from the harvest, everything that was supposed to assure a good life. “Life is not about the abundance of possessions,” Jesus said.

Today Jesus gets right to the point and says, “Sell your possessions and give alms.” Or “Sell your possessions and give mercy,” or maybe we could just say “Sell your possessions and give it away.

Does Jesus really mean it? Um....yes. Will you or I or we do it? Um...probably not. Does Jesus know that we won't? Um...Yes. But does he mean it? Yes. Let's not explain it away. Let's just sit with it for a minute.

I imagine Jesus could be frustrated, or angry, or giving a stern warning here.

And rightly so. But maybe Jesus is also saying all of this with a bit of ache and sadness because he knows how all this eats at people. Jesus looks around and sees people he loves, people it would be worth losing everything for, and he sees how much money and things eat away at us. But we live for it, sometimes kill for it. Loving relationships break up over it, and we'll develop health problems over it. Jesus looks around at people he loves and he sees how some live well because they have more than enough of it and some barely live because they have none. Maybe Jesus' heart kind of breaks while he looks around...because people he loves can be so eaten up by money and things that can be taken by thieves, that moths can eat, that in the end will all disappear. Jesus sees us giving our lives for purses that wear out, and they are purses that wear us out. So Jesus says, "Sell it. Get rid of it now, empty your bank account and find out that life isn't all about what we have or what we'll get. There's so much more."

Among first nations communities in the Pacific Northwest there is a tradition you may have heard of called the potlatch. Years ago a chief or elder or other important person would invite people from all over – from up and down the coastline, from communities further inland, from close by and far away, to come to their community for the potlatch. Hundreds of people would come together for feasting and singing and dancing and storytelling, and laughing and being together with people you haven't seen since forever. Sometimes it might be a way of establishing rank or privilege, or passing on responsibilities and status and powers from one generation to the next. Or it could mark rites of passage like marriage or birth or death. Whatever the reason for the event, one of the things

that was always a part of the potlach was the elaborate giving of gifts. The host would give all the guests all kinds of things – furs, food, fabrics, jewelry, canoes, carvings, blankets, you name it....

It was as though the sign of someone's wealth was not how much you could gather and keep for yourself; the sign of a person's wealth was in how much someone gives away.

The ceremony was made illegal by the Indian Act in 1884 – it seems that the government saw it as frivolous and wasteful and kind of a barrier to assimilation, and this idea that wealth is measured by giving rather than by gathering just didn't make sense. So it was banned in 1884, but it didn't stop. Potlaches on a smaller scale or in more remote places continued to happen, and in 1951 the ban was lifted. No matter how hard you try, you can't lock up generosity. It always finds a way. The potlatch still happens today, but maybe on a smaller scale. And the message is still clear – wealth isn't measured by gathering and keeping. It's measured by giving it away.

An elder named Annie Axu Alfred, from the Kwakwaka'wakw (kwaKWAKyuwahk) nation puts it this way: "When someone's heart is glad, they give away gifts. Our Creator gave it to us, to be our way of doing things, to be our way of rejoicing.... Everyone on earth is given something. The potlatch was given to us to be our way of expressing joy."

I've never been to a potlach and I'm guessing that most of us here haven't been. But I'm also guessing and hoping, that you and I have experienced generosity that seems a bit excessive.

I've complained before about the elaborate and overdone and way too

much and way too expensive event that a modern wedding sometimes is, but maybe I was complaining too much too soon. Maybe when people spend way more than makes sense on a wedding it's just another sign that wealth consists in giving away and not just in gathering up.

There's a bar in downtown Saskatoon that the owner shuts down for a couple of weeks every February, and he takes all the staff to somewhere warm for a good break from winter. It's a generosity that makes it clear that wealth is more about what someone gives away than it is about what someone keeps.

Maybe you've tasted that generosity at a potluck, or seen a kid share their lunch at school with another kid, or you've seen something like I did at church one day where the girl with the little Tupperware bowl of Cheerios walked over and gave it to another girl across the aisle who didn't have a Tupperware bowl of Cheerios. These things are not potlatches, but even such little things speak loudly or quietly that maybe, just maybe, wealth has more to do with what you give away than what you gather up and keep.

Jesus is not talking about a potlatch in the Pacific Northwest – or maybe he is? – but he is talking about an excessive and ridiculous kind of potlatchy generosity, where wealth is measured by giving away instead of gathering and keeping.

And then he wraps it all up with a story about slaves who keep awake and wait for their master to come home from a wedding feast. When their master finally does arrive he rearranges the way the world works and he sits the servants down at the table and serves them. As though wealth is all about giving it away

rather than gathering it and keeping it. Because the money and the stuff just don't really matter.

Keep awake, and see what matters most. There's a whole world around us, there's someone right there (quick, who's the first person you see?) who matters more than all the money we could have, who matters more than wealth ever could. We can get so dazed by wondering about whether our accounts or wallets will wear out, that we don't see that there's a whole world around us, and that there's someone right there (quick, who's the first person you'll see when you step out of your house or apartment or cabin or tent or bus shelter tomorrow morning?) who is worth more than a wallet or bank account and all that it contains?

Jesus paints a picture of a banquet and a master who serves the guests at the table, and Jesus is blunt and direct about getting wealth out of the picture... Or about changing our idea of wealth so that it's not about possessions and money. But instead wealth is about mercy and kindness and the person you meet (quick - who's the first person you see when you click that YouTube link) the person you meet right now? And that mercy and kindness and that person and those people are an unfailing treasure that no thief can take away or any moth nibble away to nothing?

Jesus wraps it all up with this story about the master who comes home and sits the servants down and serves them. And we see that this whole story is also a story about the life we have been given and the love we have been shown. For the one who has given us life has come home, come into the world, to be with us.

And this one who has given us life comes to us not to gather up wealth for himself, but to empty his own bank account, to show us mercy, to give life for us and for all.