

The End of Giving

Luke 12:22-34

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Jesus says, “Sell your possessions and give alms.” And we might be inclined to respond “We are pragmatists, especially when it comes to money. So, if you’re going to tell us to sell our possessions and give the money away, it better be worth it. Show us what we’re building.”

A couple of years ago I was at a Baptist meeting that, unbeknownst to me ahead of time, was a fundraising meeting. We listened to several presentations with the main presenter giving us a lot of dates, goals, a schedule to meet those goals, and on and on. Finally, someone interrupted him. Like me, this guy was getting impatient, so he stood up and said, “You’re killing us with information and data. Tell us a story. Tell us about someone whose life is touched by what we’re trying to do. Tell us of someone you work with. We need to see a face and hear a story. Our people need to see the human face, the tangible results, before they’ll give anything. What is our money going to make happen?”

When we give our money away, we want it to count. We’re careful. We research how much of our money goes to an organization’s overhead; how much goes to the fundraising consultant; how much is actually helping people. We want to see the architectural renderings of the building, post the picture of the child on the refrigerator, drive by the Habitat house and monitor the progress. It’s got to be worth it.

“Jesus, we are pragmatists. If we’re going to sell and give, then what are we building? This Kingdom we’re building better be good.”

This won’t be the first time Jesus disappoints the pragmatists, because his vision of giving has no obvious end. There’s no slick brochure to show us what our money will accomplish. Giving *here* looks almost pointless.

This passage from Luke begins with Jesus’ well known words about being free from worry, fear, and anxiety. These are words that I’ve long known are addressed to me. I’m a worrier; my life is dominated by fear more than I want to admit. Today Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or your body, what you will wear.” Remember those words—how he points to the ravens, and the lilies and the grass—and says, “If all of these are under God’s providential care, so are you. So stop striving, put aside your anxiety. Seek God’s Kingdom instead, and the rest will come.” And then he says with these verses: “Don’t be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms.”

Seek God’s Kingdom, as most translations put it. Not: build God’s kingdom, grow God’s kingdom, bring God’s kingdom, advance God’s kingdom, manage God’s kingdom, or control God’s kingdom—so many of *our* favorite verbs to describe our relationship to God’s Kingdom. Those aren’t the Bible’s verbs. We are invited to seek the Kingdom, and receive it. It is God’s good pleasure to *give* the Kingdom, a Kingdom no amount of money can build. God is the great philanthropist, here. God is the giver. We seek and receive.

Why, then, sell our possessions and give alms—if the end is not to build God’s Kingdom?

What strikes me is the way two of these verses are hinged to one another by the repetition of a single word: give. It's God's good pleasure to *give* the Kingdom, Jesus says, and then immediately: Sell your possessions, and *give* alms. Jesus takes God's-action verb—give—and applies it to us, without any explanation. He just tells us what makes God happy: Giving the Kingdom. And then invites giving to characterize our own lives, as if relinquishing possessions and money is the natural way of life for a people who worship a God who, in giving us Jesus and the Spirit, has given us everything we need.

As an imitation of God, we give. That's it. Just give.

“Sell your possessions, give alms.” It doesn't aim at something beyond itself. In a sense it's, well, pointless. It is not utilitarian. It is without purpose.

So much of our contemporary world teaches us, even in our faith, that everything is about purpose and what works. If we do such-and-such ministry will it result in more people coming to our church? If I deepen my prayer life it will make me a stronger person? If I get this degree, it will result in me being more employable? I will help this person so that they can be a better and more responsible person? But what Jesus is teaching us today is about learning to live without these expectations.

In her book *Traveling Mercies* Anne Lamott, who is white, tells about when she first started going to St. Andrews, an African American Presbyterian church in Marin County, California. She was broke, an alcoholic, single, and pregnant. “When I was at the end of my rope,” she writes, “the people at St. Andrew tied a knot for me and helped me hold on.” When she announced she was pregnant, the congregation cheered for her, and immediately began giving her things: food,

clothes, and most importantly the assurance the baby was going to be part of the family.

They also began slipping her money.

She writes about how many of the older women, living close to the bone on small social security checks, would sidle up to her and stuff bills in her pocket. “It was always done so stealthily,” she writes, “that you might have thought they were slipping me cocaine.” Mary Williams, in her eighties, was one of the most regular donors, giving her plastic baggies full of dimes.

Lamott needed the money. She eventually got over her embarrassment at receiving and learned to say thank you. What she finds remarkable, many years later, is that though her financial situation has changed dramatically—now she’s a successful writer with plenty of money—Mary Williams still brings her baggies full of dimes, still slips them discreetly into her pockets, even though she doesn’t need them anymore, and even though Williams herself probably does need them. Lamott’s situation has changed, but Mary hasn’t. Lamott often gives the money away or leaves the bags around her house, as reminders of the character of the church she has learned to call home, and the character of the God they worship.

Giving with no obvious end. Sell your possessions, give alms. Not to fulfill a vision, build a kingdom, grow a church, or save the world. But for no obvious reason, except: it’s just *your* way of life because it’s *God’s* way of life. Mary Williams gives because it is who she is – a little imitation of God.

No *obvious* end. But there might be a not-so-obvious end that matters very much. Selling possessions, giving alms, might be a pathway to a deeper kind of giving.

This is what the contemplative tradition calls “relinquishment,” the life-long process of giving away, of learning to see God, the world, and see each other without utility and purpose.

Sometime back a friend in another part of the country was in the grocery store and spotted in the deli section a well-known professor from a distinguished university. There were several trays out with free samples of deli food and while my friend said that while he was getting a free cookie, he noticed that the professor was trying the provolone cheese. She took a toothpick and stuck it in a piece of cheese, ate it, then she looked left, then looked right, then picked up a piece of wax paper, stuck her hand in the sample container, grabbed a fist-full of cheese, shoved it in her purse, and walked quickly away.

Wow. What a picture of the way we grab, clutch our possessions. It’s also a picture of the way we cling to our own lives. The way we clutch and grab, protect and hide our very selves. The problem is this: The lives we cling to so anxiously—the images of ourselves we have manufactured and manicured or the ones others have given to us—they are not our truest selves. They are not the lives the Apostle Paul says are “hidden with Christ in God.” *That’s* the life God freely gives us, the life we don’t need to clutch, the life that is pure gift. Grace.

The lives Jesus says not to worry about, these are the lives he says earlier in Luke we need to lose in order to find *real* life. We let go of the lives we fearfully protect and clutch in order to receive the abundant, deep life that is life in God—life it is God’s good pleasure to give. But it’s hard to even imagine letting go of ourselves when we are still clinging anxiously to our things and our money. So, “sell your possessions, give alms.” It’s an end in itself, but it also has a deeper end:

To get us used to letting go, so we finally might be able to loosen our grip on our own lives.

When we let go of the lives we cling to so anxiously, then we can share our true selves with others like Mary Williams sharing her dimes: without fear of loss, without fearing that we will be diminished somehow. And this kind of sharing is not just an imitation of God, but it's a sign of our participation in the very life of God, whose life is that eternal Trinity of self-giving love without loss, a love that spills over to us, becomes visible to us, and available to us in the gift of Jesus, God's Kingdom in a person.

One of my heroes is St. Francis. He is an exemplar, and serves as a reminder of what God is doing in me and in us: learning to give leads to learning to not be afraid. In so doing, we learn to be who God created us to be and to live a truly free life. One of my favorite pictures of Francis is of him leaping into the air, hands up and out in joy, reaching perhaps to the God who is his life. He's light. He's not burdened by possessions. And it's clear from his posture that his own life is a gift—a gift he has received, a gift he can freely share. It's a picture for me of what salvation looks like.

But Francis didn't start that way. He started as someone who had a romantic image of himself. He hungered for fame, glory and chivalry. He wanted to make a difference. His father wanted him to be successful. That was a life he eventually had to lose. He also became, very briefly, a pragmatic seller of possessions. Praying once in a church, he heard Jesus speak to him from the crucifix: "Francis, do you see that my house is in ruins. Go and restore it for me." Francis took Jesus literally, and set out to rebuild that church building. He didn't call a fundraising consultant. He went straight to his dad, a wealthy fabric merchant, and stole

several bolts of fabric from his father, sold them, and used the money to repair the church. Well, his father Pietro was not impressed and put up “Wanted” posters all over town about his thieving son. After a few months of hiding, Francis presented himself to the Bishop, who told him in no uncertain terms that he must restore the money to his father. Reports say that there was air of calm about Francis; like he was a new man somehow after his months of hiding. He stood up in front of the Bishop, the bystanders, and his Father and said: “Up to this time I have called Pietro Bernardone father, but now I am the servant of God. Not only the money but everything that can be called his I will restore to my father, even the very clothes he has given me.” And he tore off his clothes down to his undergarments, piled them in a heap on the floor, tossed the money on top of them, received the bishops blessing and went out into the world. G. K. Chesterton describes the moment: “He went out half-naked into the winter woods, walking the frozen ground between the frosty trees; a man without a father. He was penniless, he was parentless, he was to all appearances without a trade or a plan or a hope in the world; and as he went under the frosty trees, he burst suddenly into song.”

He gave up his possessions. He gave away his money. But he lost more than that. He lost his life. The false image of himself as a nobleman’s son—the life symbolized by his last name and his clothes. He lost that life. But he gained life, too—true life, what the New Testament calls the Abundant Life. A life of freedom, a life in God. A life that could be freely shared— which he spent the rest of his life doing. A life of joy.

Francis relinquished his old life and he learned to relinquish – to give away, his fears and his worries. He learned to see and live and receive the life and world God was giving him on its own terms.

I don't know about you, but this is something I'm trying to practice. Giving away money and possessions and giving up my worries is something I have to work on every day. It doesn't just happen. It doesn't happen once we win the lottery and think that we don't have to worry anymore. Like prayer and forgiveness, love and grace, giving is a practice. We practice, practice, practice every day. And it is why we practice it every Sunday.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.