

Lectionary 27/Proper 22 – October 2, 2011

The little yellow envelopes. I will never forget them. When I was a kid in Sunday school we were given little yellow envelopes. We could place our money in these envelopes and bring them to church. It was kind of funny. The adults had large envelopes and the kids had little ones. We were given the option of placing our little envelopes in the basket during the offering that took place in Sunday school or we were given the option of waiting and placing it in the collection plate as it was passed around during worship. I always chose to wait so I could put it in the offering plate.

I really enjoyed it. It gave me great joy and it was truly awesome. Somehow, that act of placing my little envelope in the plate during the service was filled with a sense of awe and, yes, mystery. I knew that I had a part to play in God's work. As small as I thought it was, it was for me a contribution to something grand and glorious. I had a part to play in the work of God. It sparked with wonder and it felt holy. Giving money and offering it to God was for me then as it is now, an act of worship.

Now, it would be great to say that this is how I began my journey as a steward of money, but that would be far from the truth. I had to learn this habit of offering. I had to learn how to give. When I was younger still, maybe 4 or 5 years old, I had the exact opposite experience. I'm pretty sure I've mentioned this story before. My earliest memory of the offering plate when it came down the pew was that I acted on my first impulse. I didn't put anything in the plate. I proceeded to take the money out. I thought it was like grabbing for candy or ice cream. I simply proceeded to dip into the large shiny plate and began to take the money out. You can imagine the embarrassment of my parents! My Mom's face got red. She loosened the change from my clenched fist and tried to whisper, but stated in a tone that I'm sure other around us heard, "It's about giving not getting!"

Now, how did I get from point A to point B? How did I get from being the greedy little grabber to becoming the kid who really enjoyed putting money in the plate instead of taking money out? Well, I suppose you'll have to ask my mother. I'm sure many things contributed to that journey of transformation. One thing is for certain. I grew in that sense of giving as an act of worship by doing it, by being given the opportunity with my little yellow envelope to participate. And over time and from that weekly habit, I grew to love this weekly ritual and to feel that, yes, indeed I was part of something greater than myself. I guess that's how I got from point A to point B.

To this day I see the offering – presenting the money we bring and often times presenting or bringing forward other items such as clothes or food items to be given away - as a symbol of everything. This offering that we take and present before God says that we offer everything – our whole lives – to God. We offer with joy and gratitude ourselves, our times, our possessions. We give it all.

Now, I would like to proclaim to you, this very day, dear sisters and brothers, that this sense of offering informs and shapes every minute of my behavior. I would like to say that, but, unfortunately that earlier gesture of taking or getting instead of giving still shows up. It creeps into my heart and my head on a fairly regular basis and, I suspect, if we were honest, all of us would say the same.

Such a sense of needing to get and have and possess comes from the competing message we all hear and that is the claim to ownership. The notion that we are owners meant to acquire and call things our own and begin to see life as mine. It's all mine!

But here's the truth. We own nothing. We are not owners. God is the owner. The earth is the Lord's. The good creation belongs to God. God is the owner. We are the stewards. We are the tenants.

But the minute we presume that we are the owners, we get confused, disoriented, and begin to lose sight of or forget all together that we are beneficiaries of a generous God. It is easy to forget. We believe it is mine – my church, my bank account, my house, my family, my world. And bubbling beneath that delusion of ownership is the impulse to grab and get and hoard and the impulse to protect what we believe is our or mine and with that comes mistrust, bigger walls between ourselves and our neighbors, lose sight of a gracious God and begin to do violence with others and ourselves.

Sort of like the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel reading about the tenants who forget they were tenants or stewards and began to behave as though they were God. A steward is someone who takes care of something that belongs to someone else. These tenants didn't understand that. Once the landowner took off, they wanted autonomy and they wanted it all. Everything. Their greed made them violent.

The graciousness of God loosens those impulses, especially when we understand that we are not owners but everything is on loan to us. We do not belong to ourselves. We cannot claim ownership. God is the owner. We do not own the vineyard we are workers in the vineyard.

It's not about having what's mine but trusting that God says you are mine!

How do we get from point A to point B?

How do we move from greedy gain to generous giving?

Well, God is the principle actor in that journey from A to B. Always. And God directs our hearts and minds to a different kind of impulse, not the claim to ownership but the generous impulse. "Never resist a generous impulse!"

The generous impulse is less concerned about holding on tight to what we think is ours and more concerned with giving and sharing with others – the needy neighbor, the hungry beggar, the lonely friend, the homeless sister or brother.

In a couple of weeks we will celebrate Generosity Sunday. This is when we offer our pledges for the next year – our intention to grow in our giving. Britt and I will grow at least one step in our offering to God. Yes, it is a commitment we all share and discern. This duty is also our joy. The Christian practice and I do believe that tithing is as much a faith practice as prayer, and Bible reading, and other works of love; is an expression of that basic stance of the Christian life which is really an echo of Jesus' own life and death, which isn't to keep or get but to joyously give away.

How do we get from path A to B? Well, I don't think it is a straight linear shot. It is a recurring pattern and invariably it gets me (it gets us) to this place, this assembly, this worship where we become grounded again in offering praise and yes, money, to the one who has given us everything. Specifically, it brings us to this Table and this prayer of thanksgiving - the posture of gratitude. So, at this table we give thanks to God has given us this world in which we live and serve and especially we give thanks for Jesus who ...

And we come to this feast where we experience first hand the generosity of God – where no one is excluded and all are welcome. As we are fed by a most generous God, we are formed into a life of responding to the generous impulses. Yes, it is a feast of abundance. It may not seem that way. The bread and the wine. It seems like just a little bit, but don't be deceived. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is God's doing and it is amazing in our eyes. Amen.