

Preaching Stewardship in an Affluent Congregation

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The season of Lent provides an important opportunity for stewardship preaching. Most stewardship sermons, of course, come in the fall of the year during stewardship season when church budgets and “pledge Sundays” loom large in the minds of preachers and church finance committees. Because budgets are so closely connected with The Stewardship Season, preachers often have difficulty moving a congregation beyond a “charitable gift” understanding of stewardship. The Lenten season, however, is not only free from the pressures and assumptions that surround fall “budget raising,” it is also a time when the church focuses on the meaning of Christian discipleship. The season of Lent consequently provides a liturgical framework—and a surprising moment—for thinking about stewardship in ways that go beyond concerns for the church budget. Such an opportunity is no doubt important in many different congregations. I believe it is particularly important for affluent congregations.

Christian stewardship, while rarely synonymous with, is always analogous to Christian conversion. Rarely does the convert at the crusade ask for a pledge card while still standing “down front” as the choir sings “Just As I Am.” At that moment, giving one’s life to Jesus, is not usually thought of in monetary terms. It may be in the evangelist’s mind, but not ordinarily in the mind of the one who has just “made a decision for Christ.” Rather, the process of stewardship maturity is more like the process of Christian maturity. That is, it is a process of growth, of education, of nurture, of learned discipleship, all very much like conversion is a process. Sanctification is the old word, and Lent is the season of the liturgical year when the church focuses most sharply on the meaning of sanctification.

Douglas John Hall makes the case that the steward metaphor, as appropriated from the Old Testament to the New, is “a kind of gospel in a nutshell.”¹ While the suggestion lends itself to exaggeration, there is nevertheless, a profound truth contained in the comparison. Hall first acknowledges that the New Testament theology of stewardship is christological, where Jesus is presented not in the role of owner, but as the authentic and preeminent steward: “All are yours; and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s” (I Cor. 3:22-23). “Jesus in fact defines and fulfills the office of the steward,”² writes Hall. Jesus is, however, not merely a model for us to emulate. That would reduce our stewardship to the category of commandment and the “walking in His steps” idea, whereas Hall insists that the most basic presupposition of our stewardship is grace.

The christological basis of stewardship means not only that our stewardship is exemplified by Jesus; rather, in keeping with Paul’s mystical regard of Christ that is the matrix of so much of the New Testament’s stewardship discussion, it is the prior stewardship of Jesus into which, through the Spirit and through faith, we are initiated...this is very different from a single exhortation that Christians ought to be good stewards. It is the difference between law (legalistically conceived) and gospel....The gospel of stewardship begins by overcoming that within us which prevents our being

stewards - the pride of imagining ourselves owners;...In short, the Christian view of stewardship starts with the stewardship of the One who did not grasp at equality with God, but was obedient. It is His stewardship in which by grace we participate.³

All of which is to say, stewardship is primarily a matter of “being” rather than “doing.” The issue first and foremost is who we are, not what we pledge or put in the plate. And in that regard, stewardship, like conversion, becomes a process through which a person comes to regard the world in a new way. We ourselves are changed as our view of reality is altered.

That is not the way most people, either in the church or out, whether affluent or poor, perceive stewardship. For most, stewardship is the mechanism by which the church raises the money to pay the preacher and fund the programs for the year, not significantly unlike the annual fund drive for the United Way. Stewardship is generally regarded in our culture as something akin to the flu. That is, you hope you don’t catch it. You avoid those who have caught it, but if you do catch it, you know it will be over in a couple of weeks. And so, for many, their pledge to the church is not unlike the preventative flu shot, which gives you just enough of the illness to prevent you from catching the real thing. No preacher I know has any more difficult task than convincing congregants that their stewardship is not about their money, but about their perception of who (or whose) they are. That is true in affluent and unaffluent churches alike. However, stewardship preaching to the affluent requires certain distinctive characteristics, and the Lenten season provides an opportunity for preaching that takes into account these distinctives.

Preaching guilt does not work. This may be true in the less affluent churches as well, but it really doesn’t work among the wealthy. As a group, they have been worked over so much by the guilt approach, they have become impervious. Besides, they already feel guilty enough. The preacher who perceives her role as a basher of the wealthy for their guilt, may indeed raise the annual budget an increment or two, but will do more theological harm than good in that such preaching serves only to validate what the wealthy tend to think already; that is, guilt can be assuaged by upping the ante. It turns the weekly offering into a “buy out” (language which they know very well) and us preachers into contemporary Tetzels, peddling appeasement like some sixteenth century indulgence.

Wealthy people, with the exception of some who get their wealth the old fashioned way, through inheritance, tend to be very intelligent people. Unfortunately, many direct their intellectual energies toward the practical techniques for making money instead of toward the philosophical questions involved in making a life. But to amass wealth today usually takes education and intelligence. My experience therefore, is that reason and logic and thoughtful sermons are more effective with the affluent than either the guilt attacks or the familiar “fair share” appeal. Books like John Hall’s, *The Steward* mentioned earlier and Douglas Meeks’s *God, The Economist* and Paul Wachtel’s *The Poverty of Affluence* can be very helpful because of the reasoned manner in which the authors address economics theologically. The extent some will go, however, to avoid such a confrontation would be humorous if the issue were not so serious. While I have no data, I do have a strong hunch that generally speaking the data would support the observation that church involvement moves in reverse

proportion to the rise in economic attainment. Consequently, it is not surprising to find among the most brilliant giants of business and industry, some of the most theologically ignorant. Andrew Carnegie has rendered a far greater influence on the American attitude toward economics than Jesus Christ. Carnegie published an article in 1889 in which he argued that it would not behoove the Christian faith to say anything about how money was made, since the process of producing wealth is determined by inexorable natural laws, such as the laws of the survival of the fittest and the competition of tooth and fang. Religion, he maintained, became relevant only after the production process has run its course, money has been made and reinvested. Only then, said this self-ordained "theologian," should Christianity enter the scene to assist successful producers and acquirers know how to disperse their surplus money wisely, that is, charitably. Such remains the dominant theology of the very rich, and such remains the challenge of every preacher called to preach stewardship to the wealthy.

What we must help the wealthy understand is that stewardship is more than philanthropy, and that when philanthropy is perceived as stewardship it in fact disguises a great deal of injustice perpetrated by some Christian philanthropists who were held up as models of charity. Dom Helder Camara's statement "when justice is the issue, charity is a sin," remains true. These concepts are tough to preach, and the preacher must use all the skill at her disposal not to alienate. Still it is our responsibility to proclaim that the gospel requires a stewardship that is global as well as local - social as well as personal and political as well as economic.

One of the baffling things about so many sophisticated and successful global entrepreneurs is how provincial they become when it comes to stewardship. People who deal daily with world markets and know their interrelatedness, who know that we live in a global economy, still prefer to live with a local theology. For all of its short comings, liberation theology is a wake-up call to all those of us in the "first" world who have been asleep to the truth that a local theology in a global economy is an anathema to the God of the universe. While the preacher would probably not preach it this way, he nonetheless should recognize, as John Douglas Hall recognizes "liberation theology is a theology for those who have fallen among thieves...but we are the thieves."⁴ And so, he says, our question to ourselves is "How do you develop a Christian theology for thieves?" Now, of course, he is not talking about obvious thieves. He is talking about nice thieves, like us, who may well be unknowing, even unwilling if we knew, but whose lifestyle and way of doing business has nevertheless had the reverse Robin Hood effect of robbing from the poor for the benefit of the rich. Maybe the sermon is not the place. Maybe a study group is better, though "highpowered" business people rarely make time for study groups. After all "time is money," as any money manager will tell you. So, maybe better over lunch in some swank private club. (I still recall the irony of that moneyed member of my church who invited me to lunch at the Commerce Club in Atlanta following a stewardship sermon because he had one question to ask: "Did I really believe in the capitalist economic system of free enterprise?" I took the question as a validation of my biblical orthodoxy. However it is done, the dialogue must occur if we are to be faithful to our calling to "preach stewardship in a wealthy church." Not only for the sake of the congregants, but for the preacher as well, we need the reminder:

For a good two-thirds of the human family there is no such thing as “life in all its fullness” because they are impoverished, living on the edge of death in stark, economically conditioned poverty. They are hungry, they have no shelter, no shoes, no medicine for their children, no clean water to drink, no work - and they see no way of getting their oppressors off their backs. Trade agreement and international relations are dictated by the rich first world and imposed on the poor, plunging them daily deeper into destitution. The mere struggle for survival destroys the fullness of life, the shalom of God, of which the Bible speaks.⁵

Because preaching in a wealthy church can become so very seductive, the preacher must be very careful. There is an operative myth among the moneyed and the mighty that “real greatness gives license for great indulgence.”⁶ It is the old army adage, “rank has its privilege.” Consequently, preachers to the wealthy must constantly remind themselves of the words of Jesus in Matthew 20: 26-28,⁷ and never fail to remind those to whom they preach Sunday after Sunday.

Incidentally, the preacher must also remember that the sermon is not the only vehicle for the message in worship. The liturgy is an indispensable instrument of biblical truth. Consequently, hymns must be carefully chosen, prayers crafted, responsive readings and choral readings selected with care, creeds and confessions picked which underscore a theologically sound stewardship. For example, the Declaration of Faith is a powerful resource of faith statements which can be excerpted and used in place of the traditional Apostles Creed.

We believe Christ calls us to live for our neighbors. Jesus broadened the definition of neighbor to include those ordinarily despised and excluded. His life in behalf of others led to persecution and death. He commanded his disciples to live the same way. We believe Christ gives us and demands of us lives that recognize all people in all cultures as our neighbors on this planet. Christ teaches us to go beyond legal requirements in serving and helping our neighbor, to treat our neighbor's needs as our own, to care passionately for the other's good, to share what we have. It is part of our discipline to live in simplicity, avoiding greed and luxury that threaten our neighbors survival. We are obligated to speak the truth in love, to listen with patience and openness, to love our enemies, to accept the risk and pain which love involves.⁸

Probably the biggest obstacle a preacher faces with the wealthy is that insidious idea so prevalent in this nation that if you have enough money, you can do as you please. Now few would admit to it, but it is a principal at work in all of us. The rich are just able to act on it more than the poor. During the Iran contra mess, Ellen Goodman wrote an editorial on those three wealthy adventure capitalists—Ellen Garwood, William O'Boyle, Joseph Coors—who “regarded the chance to build a nice little army in Nicaragua like the chance to build a hospital wing in their home town or a college library at their alma mater.”⁹ Goodman describes how these self-appointed foreign policy experts circumvented the laws and policies of their nation to provide everything from airplanes to boots for the contra army. However, these “patriots” able

to endow a war were not “weirdos” says Ms. Goodman: rather they are but the logical extension of a mentality that has been emerging in this country over the past decade. She dates it, generally, from the time in 1980 when candidate Reagan in the New Hampshire debate, demanded his way because “I paid for this microphone!” Ms. Goodman claims that one of the most precious things the rich can buy in America is “out.” “If people have enough money, it appears they can buy out of consensus building, buy out of community, buy out of compromising, buy out of, around, or over the common will.”

She illustrates the thesis by asking what people with money—not supermoney, just ordinary money—do with it, suggesting that the first thing we do is buy independent movement, a car to replace mass transit. Next, we purchase independent space, a house to replace an apartment, a larger house followed by a second house. At the high levels of limousines, helicopters, corporate empires, and vast personal estates, the whole process of buying out becomes vastly exaggerated, she suggests. All of which brings to mind a well-heeled physician in one church I served, who resigned from the session and left the church over a disagreement with the session’s policy on a particular matter. I asked him “Where will you go?” He responded that he was not sure. He had visited a number of churches, none of which he could agree with entirely. “Maybe, I’ll just have to start my own,” said this Presbyterian doctor, forgetting for the moment the first commandment. It is the old Pogo joke (or is it B.C.?). What is the golden rule? The golden rule is “those who have the gold make the rules.” Only the joke loses its humor when one is called to preach to people for whom the temptation of such economic power is to be above the ordinary processes of human intercourse, above community restraints, above the law, above God. It is the greatest challenge confronting those called to preach regularly to a wealthy congregation. And the second greatest temptation is likened to the first - that the preacher himself succumb to the same temptation. Lent, the season when the church reflects on and seeks to follow a discipleship that is the way of the cross, confronts these temptations and calls all to a stewardship rooted in a modest and thankful heart.

Now having leveled those rather harsh charges against the rich, let me conclude that my experience in an affluent church has introduced me to some of the most genuinely Christian, generous, and committed people I have ever met. Poverty has no corner on piety, and affluence does not necessarily negate it. In my experience the scriptures are never more true than when Jesus said “It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.” However, miracles do happen and I have been privileged to observe quite a few.

It will sound flip, I know. I do not mean it that way, I mean it quite seriously. “It is a tough job being minister to the wealthy - but somebody has to do it.” In all seriousness, it is a tough and unique calling precisely because the same temptations that are so alluring to the affluent, are equally enticing to those who minister to the affluent. Consequently, it is a call to be considered only by those who possess a strong sense of who they are, strength to be that person and courage to proclaim unashamedly the true “boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.”¹⁰ Finally, as in every condition, the most effective preacher to an affluent congregation will be the one who practices in his or her own life, a responsible and exemplary stewardship.

NOTES

¹ Douglas John Hall, *The Steward* (Erdman's, 1990), 49.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 44 - 45.

⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁵ Dorothy Stolle, "Life in its Fullness," (address, the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, August 1983).

⁶ Words spoken at John Belushi's funeral.

⁷ "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

⁸ *The Proposed Book of Confessions*, 169.

⁹ Ellen Goodman, editorial in *The Washington Post* "Money Placed Elite Above The Law."

¹⁰ Ephesians 3: 8-9.