

Rightly Cambered in Advent – Stewardship out of Season

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One summer Sunday earlier this year, a parishioner waited in line following worship to express his displeasure that the lectionary had assigned Luke's Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) during the dog days of August, when half the congregation was on vacation. "That would have made a terrific stewardship text in October," he said.

"It was a terrific stewardship text *today*," I responded, smiling, and added what has become for me a recurring refrain over the years, "Stewardship is *never* out of season." I meant what I said at the church door that Sunday; I have long found it unfortunate that talk about stewardship gets relegated to a few Sundays in the fall when we are stressing the budgetary needs of the church. In my mind, there is no more important measure of our discipleship than the way we steward the gifts God has given us; thus, there is no season that is out-of-season for faithful conversations about stewardship. I would also argue that there may be no season more in need of such conversation than the season of Advent.

In one sense, Advent is the perfect stewardship season, given the Advent stress on watchfulness and time, on the unexpected time and circumstance of Christ's return, on the culmination of human history, and more personally, on the end of *our own* human history. In that latter sense, the Parable of the Rich Fool is an exquisitely suitable Advent text, for it bears at its heart a profound message about time. Novelist Clyde Edgerton's character, Grove McCord, got at that message when he said, "You are history longer than you are fact," a truth the Rich Fool failed even to consider.¹

Of course, that message may not be the first lesson we notice in the parable. The more obvious point is its warning about the dangers inherent in the relentless pursuit and accumulation of wealth and possessions. That word, too, is a worthy message for Advent, the season when Mary sings for us, "God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away." "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus says, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions." I need not elaborate on the counter-cultural quality of such counsel in the American holiday season.

Michael Lindvall offers a helpful observation about the hidden danger in all the various things we acquire either as gifts or purchases that seems especially pertinent in these days. Whenever we bring home something new, he says, when we open the box, we are customarily greeted not only by the thing itself, but by pages of written materials: owner's manuals, assembly diagrams, directions for use, warranty cards, surveys and the like. All these pages, Lindvall says, can be classified in one of two categories, either as instructions or warnings: "*instructions* on assembly, use, and maintenance, and *warnings* not to let kids put pieces in their mouths, not to use this product in the bathtub...[or] without safety goggles." Still, he says:

Maybe they should put one more *instruction* page in every box. It could say,

“You are a fortunate consumer to have the ability to own this fine product. Remember to share what you have.” And maybe they should put yet another *warning* label on every new product. In bold red letters in a white decal affixed to the side, it could read, “Warning: This thing, like all things, could be dangerous to your spiritual health.”²

The problem is, we are all the time confusing the eternal and the temporal, the need and the want, the necessity and the excess. To know the eternal necessities and to live into them is, I believe, part of what it means to be “rich toward God,” as Jesus says. To live lives consumed by transitory things may be satisfactory for a season, but in the end, it leaves us spiritually impoverished, adrift from our moorings, apart from the purposes and relationships that give life meaning.

Sometimes, when I find the pace of pastoral work becoming too frenetic, I observe a kind of balancing ritual. I walk down to our church’s memorial garden, where the ashes of scores of church members are buried. I sit there for a while and study the names etched in the garden’s granite panels – so many people I have known and loved during my years as pastor here. I speak their names aloud, one by one...so many remarkable people. I think of the extroverts and the introverts, the up-front leaders and the quiet servants. There are those who died too young and those who outlived all their friends and siblings; those who died suddenly, tragically, and those whose deaths were long and labored. Of the latter, I remember watching more than a few come to terms with the fact that all their striving and all their acquisitiveness, even all their best efforts, ultimately had to be relinquished and entrusted to someone else. Ultimately, and sooner for some than for others, their whole lives had to be handed back to God. Every time I visit the garden, I reckon that many of these saints, in the end, came to understand that the only things that would finally matter after they were gone were the good they made possible along the way and their investment of time and energy in those they loved and those they served. I remember, too, that those who seemed to have found the greatest contentment in the face of life’s final mystery were those who had seen their lives as full of gifts, those who had lived their lives fully as stewards of the gifts that had been entrusted to them. They were those who had a profound understanding of what time it was.

Our stewardship of time, our awareness of the inbreaking of the eternal into the temporal and of what constitutes a faithful response, is so important. The cultural anthropologist Edward Hall once wrote: “Time talks. It speaks more plainly than words. The message it conveys comes through loud and clear. Because it is manipulated less consciously, it is subject to less distortion than the spoken language. It can shout the truth when words lie.” He continues,

If we could comprehend what time is saying about us, what would we discover?.... [M]any of us are concerned about whether we could give a worthy answer to this question....The problem has been around for millennia, for time has never been given to mortals in unlimited supply, and we cannot prevent its passing. Yet the problem of time has taken on especially startling features amid the rapid change engulfing the world today. Our ancestors, most of them farmers, worked to the rhythms of the sun and the seasons. Our children do work that is shaped by the round-the-clock

rhythms of the World Wide Web. The shift from one pattern of life in time to another has been under way for centuries, but in recent decades it has spiraled in speed and scope. Our pace is accelerating. Our hours are unhinged from nature. Whether we as human beings will or can or should adapt to the emerging rhythms of time is an open question.³

How then will we cultivate the notion of time as a gift? How can Advent help us to think about a proper stewardship of time? In part, I believe it can do so by reminding us of the length of our days. “So teach us to number our days,” the Psalmist prayed, “that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, who spent a career dealing with end-of-life issues, understood that prayer. She said, “It’s only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth – and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up – that we begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it were the only one we had.”⁴

I think back to the comment my friend made to me this August past, when he argued for moving the Parable of the Rich Fool to the autumn stewardship season. The more I think about it, however, the more I come to think that perhaps a more appropriate placement is in Advent, especially the American Advent, when we are all the time forgetting what time it is. Consider Advent in our towns and communities, when the great eschatological texts, the annual appearances of John the Baptist, the visits of the angels to Mary and Joseph, and Mary’s Magnificat all have to compete for attention with the red bows on Lexus SUVs or whatever extravagant, must-have gifts may await the acquisitive gift-getters this year. Consider the difficulty of getting people to settle for singing Advent hymns in a land where Christmas Muzak has been piped into the malls since Halloween. In such a context, the Parable of the Rich Fool can urge us toward a proper regard for time—for the gift of time, of the way we use it, and the way that gift can be taken back.

To be sure, this story of the Rich Fool is an engaging story that Jesus tells, clearly one of the most compelling of the parables. The parable is rooted in a simple request someone brings to Jesus – a request for help with a family dispute about an inheritance. But that request becomes a platform on which Jesus lays out a warning about the dangers of greed and a reminder that no one’s life is based on an abundance of possessions. “Let me tell you a story,” Jesus says, and the story he tells is of a rich landowner whose land produces an abundant harvest, and of the calculations this landowner performs leading to his conclusion that even his ample grain elevator isn’t big enough for all those crops. So he resolves to tear down his existing storage facilities and build bigger ones, so that he will be set for life. The problem, Jesus says, is that the man has left God out of the equation. God speaks directly to this rich man and calls him a fool, because God knows that the man’s life is coming to an end that very night. “All these things you have prepared,” God inquires, “whose will they then be?” And then Jesus replies that such is the case with any person who builds a personal treasure but is not rich toward God. It is a haunting story, and an unsettling conclusion.

Two things, in particular, are striking in this story. The first is the way God addresses the landowner. God doesn’t call him, “Reprobate.” He doesn’t say, “You sinner!” God calls the farmer a fool. “You fool!” God says. *You fool!*

Now, what is it, exactly, that makes this man a fool? To many, his actions might seem prudent, forward-thinking, even progressive. Why would he be considered a

fool? That question has long intrigued me, and it came into focus for me once again a while back in a most unexpected place – during a family trip to northwest England. It was there that I believe I came across a hint of an answer. We were in the car one afternoon, traveling from the village where we were staying north of Manchester to the Yorkshire town of Haworth, a town made famous by the Brontë sisters who lived and wrote there with their pastor father in the mid-nineteenth century. The trip involved crossing the moors, a vast expanse of rolling grasslands and sedges that, even in summer, seemed to warn of imposing wintry weather. The road across the moors that day was not very good. About one-and-a-half lanes of semi-paved thoroughfare were bordered on one side by the hillside above and on the other by even more hillside below.

We were making our way across the moors when we approached a sweeping left turn and saw the road sign. The sign had an arrow noting the turn we were approaching, and underneath the arrow were the words, “Adverse Camber.” We were, I suppose, a hundred meters beyond the curve before I asked, “What did that sign say?” My cousin was quick to respond. “It’s my favorite British road sign,” he said, and then he explained. Camber is tilt or slope, or an arching. “Adverse camber” as a warning sign describes a road that arches and slopes or tilts the wrong way. In our particular case, the sign spoke of a left hand turn in which the road, instead of banking to the left, actually sloped away to the right.

I love British road signs. And I laughed at the wonderful British understatement of danger in that sign. Adverse camber, indeed! I wondered how many people had driven off the road and down the hillside pondering what the sign meant. However, as the day and the trip wore on, I began to think of that road sign as an amazingly apt description of the reason Jesus describes the rich landowner as a fool. It is because his life slopes the wrong way. Instead of cambering toward God in gratitude and toward neighbors in graciousness, it had tilted precariously toward his own greedy assumptions. Instead of banking toward its source, his life had become imbalanced, and his cavalier assumptions about time and the centrifugal forces of avarice and self-indulgence were ready to run him off the road. A fool indeed!

“So it is,” Jesus said, “with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” That statement, of course, raises the other significant interpretive question, the other striking feature about this story: what does it mean to be “rich toward God?” Later in this same chapter of Luke, Jesus will point to the linkage between the location of one’s treasure and the location of one’s heart, and in another story, recorded in each of the three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus will speak of laying up treasure in heaven. Is that what he means by being rich toward God? Such linkages are certainly part of such a definition, but I think of “rich toward God” as an attitude toward life, framed by gratitude to its Source. I think of it as a life cambered toward its true Center.

Athey Keith is a Kentucky farmer in Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*. He is the kind of farmer who eschewed the modernization and machine-driven agriculture of the corporate farm in favor of a kind of farming that took note of the needs of the land and tried to live in harmony with it. He owns a lot of property near Port William, but Berry describes Athey Keith this way: “Athey was not exactly, or not only, what is called a ‘landowner.’ He was the farm’s farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his; [and] he knew that of the two lives, his was meant to

be the smaller and the shorter.”⁵

In my life, I have known a whole generation of people like that...not necessarily farmers, though farmers seem to understand the contingencies of life better than most others. But I have known many people who came of age in the 1930s, say, whose lifelong values were built around concepts not of bigger and faster and more productive, but of balance and proportion and scale. “He was the farm’s farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his.”

Now, if the truth be told, I am the product of a different generation. I grew up believing the old motto of General Electric: “Progress is our most important product.” I am also a creature of comfort, a beneficiary of convenience, a child of technology and innovation. I am disciplined about my resources to some degree, but I still tend to confuse wants and needs from time to time. Like others of my generation, I am also a person who prefers control, or at least the illusion of control, to contingency.

Wendell Berry didn’t use the word specifically, but behind the metaphors he employed to depict Athey Keith was a profound sense of the *stewardship* of the earth, of the stewardship of life and time and relationships. A deep-rooted stewardship simply affords one a different way of understanding this world. By stewardship one sees life not in terms of control, but in terms of service and sacrifice for something much larger than our own selves. A steward sees the world not in terms of endless bounty, but in terms of thoughtful limits and appropriate boundaries. Stewards know that the earth is ours, not in the sense that it belongs to us so much as because, by the expenditure of our energy and work, we belong to it.⁶ Stewards understand that life is sometimes fleeting, and that our faithful response to that fact is not so much to acquire all we can acquire, building bigger and bigger barns, or even to see the earth and its riches as our rightful inheritance, but to know at our depths that we borrow the earth and its riches from our children and from generations yet unborn. Stewardship teaches us to number our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Athey Keith may not have been a rich man in worldly terms. He may not have been a particularly intellectual man either, but he was no fool. Indeed, in the language of Luke’s Gospel, one might well have called him “rich toward God.” He understood the nature of God’s abundance; he understood his dependency on that abundance, understood that it was an abundance not of his own making; understood the way he belonged to that abundance far more than it ever belonged to him.

The problem with the Rich Fool was that he couldn’t see that at all. He just didn’t get it, not one bit. As he rounded what would be the last turn of his life, he had no thought of God – no thought of gratitude – and all that he valued would soon slip away, because his life was so adversely cambered. And yet, *he* thought he was at the top of his game. He never even noticed the danger until it was too late. Of course, that’s what made him a fool.

In this season of timelessness commingled with human time, in this season of extravagant abundance made manifest to us in a simple cradle, we pray to be rightly cambered, to be good stewards, to have eyes to see gifts and hearts to know what time it is. This is not a time for foolishness, all other signs of the times to the contrary.

Notes

1. Clyde Edgerton, *In Memory of Junior* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1992), 47.
2. Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 115. Italics mine.
3. Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), xi-xii.
4. Stan Toler, *Stewardship of Time* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1998).
5. Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (New York: Counterpoint Books, 2000), 182.
6. I borrow this line from another book by Wendell Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack* (Washington: Counterpoint Books, 1974 (rev. 1999)), 125.