

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost – Tyler Merrill-Cranston

Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

I've heard Roger McPeak say at least three times that you have to learn to let God love you. Who is the subject of that sentence?—God. Who is the object?—you.

I've heard Rick say at least ten times that you have to become the object rather than the subject. And Caden, do you know what I've heard your dad say about 100 times? He tells all his students this at the beginning of every class: It's about God, stupid.

That's what the rich man in the parable didn't ever figure out. Ben would have called him stupid, God called him a fool.

Listen to the rich man's language; it's the language of someone who sees himself as the subject of a story about himself. *What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'* Notice how he makes his decisions all by himself without bringing anyone else, even God, into his thinking. He doesn't give even thanks for the abundance he received!

Contrast the rich man's language with someone from the beginning of Luke's gospel who says, *I am the Lord's servant, let it be done to me according to your word.* Those are the words of Mary, a poor twelve-year-old girl living on the margins of society. She gets it right whereas the rich, educated, older, successful businessman who has saved up enough money to begin a comfortable retirement gets it wrong.

Mary calls herself God's servant. She's the object of God's story. To go back to the water guns: God is the one squirting Mary. Sounds like baptism!—which is in fact an act in which we affirm that God is doing something rather than us. God is washing us and adopting us into her family. Hear again the words from Hosea, the words of a loving, mother God: *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son... it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.*

Amanda told us that we always have to look for the verbs. What did God do in that text?: God loved, called, taught, took, healed, led, lifted, bent, and fed. I'm telling you that you always have to look for the subject and the object. Who is loving, calling, teaching, healing, lifting, leading, bending, feeding?—God! Who is God doing these things to?—her children.

The best part of that passage may be when God says, *I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.* God is doing these things among us all the time, and we may hardly ever notice. But there are moments we have like Jacob when we realize what God is doing and exclaim, *Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*

I remember having that kind of experience when Elise and I were married in May. Marriage, like baptism, is a sacrament, and in the sacraments we affirm that we are the objects of something God is doing. For instance in the wedding ceremony we say, "What God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

My experience was during the ceremony, out at the McPeak compound, after the processional when we turned our backs to the congregation, facing the golden wheat field and open blue skies,

and sang, “For the Beauty of the Earth”. That’s when I just lost it, because the words of that song can make us overwhelmingly aware of the amazing things God is doing among us all the time. “For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth over and around us lies, Lord of all to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise!” We realize, after what may be a long period of time, how abundantly God has gifted us, and we finally sing her a joyous song of thanksgiving.

Except during the wedding ceremony I had to stop singing because I couldn’t sing without crying and I didn’t want to have to turn back around to everybody looking like a sobbing idiot. God has given many of us an abundance of money. Our question today is, how do we use the extra money God has given us to be rich towards God, and to participate more fully in God’s story? By extra money I’m talking about any money that is left over after paying basic expenses for ourselves and our dependents such as food, clothing, and shelter.

The rich man from the parable used his extra money for personal accumulation and enjoyment. He upgraded his standard of living, maximized his savings for retirement, and sat down to be served at his table.

But God’s story is one about serving rather than being served. Remember, Jesus said that the one serving is greater, and that he was among us as one who served. One of the ways we can measure whether we are being rich towards God is to ask whether we’re using our extra money to serve others or to have others serve us.

God’s story is also one about bringing abundant life, especially to the poor. Is our extra money being used in such a way that it is being converted into genuine human flourishing?

Giving to institutions that seek to enable human flourishing, like the Simple Room, Eden’s Glory, or Greenville College, is one way of being rich towards God. Giving to individuals directly is another way, although we should keep in mind that a lack of money is usually not the primary problem for the poor, and a sudden influx of cash may do more harm than good.¹ Paying our taxes may very well be another way of being rich towards God, as the money provides many public goods and services. Accumulating possessions and property can be another—for instance, St. Paul’s is in conversation about receiving a major piece of property down on the square. But unlike the rich man, we are critically questioning how to receive that property in a way that enables us to partner with God in the work that God is doing in the world.

But what work is God doing among us? And how do we partner with what God is doing? These are not necessarily easy questions to answer—just ask a few board members how many hours of board meetings have gone into thinking about the property on the square. But nobody ever said the questions should be easy to answer! Henri Nouwen, in his book about Christian leadership says, “Strenuous theological reflection will allow us to discern critically where we are being led” (Nouwen, 85).²

In other words, we have to learn to think like Jesus, which will be really hard because Jesus thinks a lot differently than most of us—and we have to learn to think like Jesus so that we can figure out how to be servants in God’s story rather than masters in our own.

So whether you’re asking questions about what to do with the property God has given our community on the square, the extra \$500 in your bank account at the end of each month, or the quarters you have saved up in your piggybank, *let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not cling to power or to money, but emptied*

¹ Wells, Sam. <http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/2007/070805.pdf>

² Nouwen, Henri. *In the Name of Jesus*. 85

himself, taking on the form of a slave.

See how the story of God in Christ, of the incarnation, is itself a story about the subject becoming the object? May we learn to let God do the same work in us—learn to let God love us. Amen.