

Sustainability

Sermon Based on Luke 19:11-27

August 30, 2009

Last week we introduced the idea that in our freedom we can choose to be in the world with an ethic of stewardship rather than an ethic of dominance and submission. Put another way we can live our individual lives and order our communal life in accordance to “caring for” rather than “dominating over”. I want to go further in our exploration about this ethic and I begin with acknowledging the apparent direct challenge of today’s scripture.

The parable slaps us in the face. It is offensive on several levels. The idea that those who have more will get more and those who have little or nothing will lose even what little they have offends our sense of justice as fairness. It goes against some of our earliest preschool lessons about sharing and not being the bully.

On another level, the parable goes against the mild and meek Jesus we have created in order to demand niceties from ourselves and each other. WWJD! What would Jesus do? We may not know what Jesus would do but we are pretty sure he would be nice about it and so should we all be nice. The parable does not support this.

The parable speaks a truth about power and the demonic structures of society. We cannot dismiss the parable as a poorly constructed story with a demoralizing moral. It is based on a series of real historical events that happened in the time of Jesus and his listeners. Everyone who heard it would know who he was challenging and the naked evil political power he was exposing.

It was common practice for powerful local politicians to go to Rome and get their power solidified and aligned with the greatest political power in the world. It was also common for people to petition to Rome so that Rome would not endorse the tyrants but it happened anyway and when the tyrants returned to their homeland then they would reward their supporters and slaughter the opposition. This is what the political and spiritual leaders of Israel would do. As Jesus shared this parable it was easy for the listeners and bystanders to make all the right references about their own politicians.

This is a great opportunity to say that Jesus was more than a nice guy and the faith is more than a moral code encouraging civility. Jesus was a revolutionary with a revolutionary vision, and a revolutionary spirit and a revolutionary message. He was not a Democrat, a Republican, a Socialist, or a Communist. Jesus was a Kingdom-crat or a Heave-lican. He was motivated by a larger vision that included the political but was not confined by the political.

For the most part, people who want some kind of confirmation for their conventional wisdom and mores will be very disappointed in Jesus. However, Jesus would not disappoint them today. Jesus tells it like it is. Jesus said the representative of political power has the last word and that word sounds like this; 'I tell you that to everyone

who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.'

I want to remind you of the setting of this parable. Jesus has standing right next to him a no good for nothing, rotten, ragged eared, flea bitten scoundrel of a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Jesus has put his arm around this man and says, "Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. He is a child of God! He has decided to repent from the ethic of domination and has acted out the ethic of stewardship by giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back people he cheated 4 times what he swindled!" Zacchaeus was a servant of the ruthless political system who was doing very well for the king and stood in line for great rewards, but he changed and he changed his ethic.

Which story do we hear about; the transformed tax collector or the ruler seeking more power? It seems there are fewer stories about Mr. Smith going to Washington. It seems more likely that local politicians go to the seat of power (political and corporate power) and cut deals in order to secure their own power and the people protest and the people suffer.

As the health care debate unfolds I hear the ethic of domination and the word that everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.

As people are losing their jobs and families are getting food from Food Banks and out of the back of trucks, I hear the ethic of domination and the word that everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.

As people cross the desert trying to secure the minimum sustainable life for their families they need a little bit of water I hear the ethic of domination and the word that everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.

As more houses slip into foreclosure I hear the ethic of domination and the word that I hear the ethic of domination and the word that everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.

As the debate about school funding continues I hear the ethic of domination and the word that everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.

It is easy to see how the moral of the parable works in the real world of power in the most negative ways but does it work the other way? Can it work for good as well. I think it does.

Let me give a very simple example from my own life. One of my jobs around the house was to cut the grass. We had this old broken down push mower that was almost impossible to start but I would get it going and cut the grass.

We also had a new shiny red Wheel Horse lawn tractor. It was a beautiful thing but I was not allowed to use it. One day I asked dad why I couldn't use the tractor since I was the one who cut the grass. I have never forgotten what he said to me. He said, "The tractor is very expensive and it takes a lot of responsibility to use. You have a hard time meeting your other responsibilities such as taking out the trash. I want to be able to count on you for the little things before I trust you with the bigger things." In other words, "Show yourself worthy in small things so I will give you more." By next summer I was able to use the tractor and not only did I cut our grass but I got several yards to cut and made some good money as a young kid. That experience helped me get the grass cutting job at the church that meant more grass, bigger tractors, and more money.

This truth goes the other way as well. When I do not take responsibility then my life begins a spiral down. If I do not love and respect people then I will end up a very lonely and bitter old man. I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

I want to continue this strand of thought with the idea of sustainability.

Sustainability is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This definition was created at the World Commission on Environment and Development. According to the Dictionary of Sustainable Management this definition has been added to the Swiss Federal Constitution and thus is part of their vision and helps shape their national agenda.

It is a definition that is very much in the spirituality of Cherokee and other eastern Native American people. In the Iroquois Confederacy leaders of the people were mandated to consider the effects of their decisions and actions on their descendants for seven generations into the future. To quote one of the Great Laws of the Iroquois, "In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation... even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine."

Seven generation sustainability is promoted as an ecological concept. I propose that it is also a spiritual concept that urges the current generation of humans to live and work in such a way that it at least does no harm and at best it produces benefits for all generations into the future. It goes directly against the ethic of domination and is part of the ethic of stewardship.

The lesson of the parable, like all truth, is a sword that cuts both ways; for us and against us. It reminds us that life is not static. We are either spiraling up or down.

When we order our lives and our society by the ethic of domination we perpetuate a downward spiral of the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (literally and figuratively) and we actualize the literal meaning of the parable.

I encourage us to choose stewardship and the ethic of “caring for” over the ethic of “dominating over”. When we order our lives and our society by the ethic of stewardship we begin a positive reversal of the other ethic. We begin an upward spiral for all people. It is reinforced with wisdom such as “the more you give the more that comes back to you” and “those who seek to save their life will lose it, but those who give their life away will gain it abundantly” and “what you do for others you do for yourself”. The more we invest and care for each other the more we will gain and the less we invest and care in each other.....we will lose even what little was there.