

From Greed to Generosity

A sermon preached at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati by Canon Rick Cross, August 5, 2007.

Flora Tyler was my maternal grandmother who died many years ago. She was rich toward God. She and my grandfather never owned the house they lived in. Grandfather worked as a truck driver and hand laborer for the state highway department in Maine. Grandmother Flora kept house and brought up six girls. All her life she was poor and had very few material possessions. Before she died, she gave away everything she had, which usually meant one item to each member of our large family. I have a small mustard-yellow sponge wear bowl I fondly remember being filled with my grandfather's freshly sliced cucumbers, peppered and soaking in apple cider vinegar. Grandmother was not known to be particularly religious, not very active in a church, but she read everything she could get her hands on, usually stacks of borrowed books from the state library bookmobile that came to the small town square every other week.

I wonder if she heard Jesus' story and the same message from God that the rich fool did, *"...Your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"*

Flora was poor in the eyes of the world; but she was generous with all she had and she was rich toward God.

Given the consumer-oriented culture in which I live, where more is better, how am I to become "rich toward God?" The life style to which my family and I have become accustomed since moving on up through college degrees, professional vocational advancements, and an expanded horizon of comforts and tastes, has left me looking back over the generation at Flora, as a naive and primitive figment of my moral and ethical imagination. Times have changed. Things are vastly different now. We live in different worlds. Giving all my possessions away or taking a vow of poverty cannot be my path to Godly richness. I want to follow Jesus, but I seek a new model.

My immediate family and I had a crisis before my final year of seminary at General in New York City. We did not have money enough to pay for tuition and living expenses. The financial aid officer called me in and told me unless Amy could get a full-time teaching job to supplement our scholarships and loans, I should not return. Carrie was in fifth grade; Katherine was two. Amy ran a coffee shop, worked in the day care, and we both cleaned guest rooms for work study money, but it wasn't enough. She transported Katherine all over the city for medical, therapeutic, and infant stimulation services. There was no way she could teach.

I had already dropped out of seminary for a two-year leave after my first year when

Katherine was born. The move to New York City had been a strain on our family, and we were relatively poor. I had cashed in my teaching retirement to pay for the second year. We had no savings, and high student loans. Our tiny sponsoring parish in Northern Maine had already given us \$500. toward my books. (Mr. Procter did not set up soap-making in Maine, and neither the bishop nor the diocese was able to lend much support.) But we knew God had led us on the journey and we found ourselves in the situation where we had to believe in resources we could not see, or even imagine.

We returned home to Maine that summer worried and fearful and not knowing where we would be the next year. I shared my plight with Paul, a close clergy friend and mentor back home, who asked if he might share my story with a friend of his.

Norman Smith was a wealthy man who owned a publishing company in Connecticut. His wife had pastoral counseling from my clergy friend, and had experienced a spiritual renewal in her life. Norman, however, claimed to be an atheist, distrusted everything about church and God, and was a cynical, hard-nosed business type. His wife's changed life, however, had gotten his curiosity aroused about healing of memories.

Paul arranged a meeting between Norman Smith and me at the Meriwether Post Estate he had just purchased, high atop a cliff overlooking Northeast Harbor. I will never forget the meeting. After some preliminary discussion about my life, my journey and my financial dilemma, Norman turned to me and with his steel blue eyes looking through me asked, "So, how much do you need to finish seminary?"

"I'm not sure," I stammered, not knowing what to say. In his typically gruff, business-like tone Norman said, "Well, go home and figure it out and let me know how much you need each month. I'm putting you on my company payroll and you'll receive a monthly check for what you need."

Norman was the only friend other than Amy and the girls who came to my graduation from General. The self-proclaimed atheist looked more like an angel to me in the congregation that day.

The Gospel is often Jesus' story, with a zinger moral ethical challenge and call to discipleship. And as you know, the epistles were letters to early Christian communities struggling to put Jesus' teachings into action in their own complicated lives. Some of the nuts and bolts of human behavior and misbehavior were addressed.

The writer to the community of Colossae makes a clear distinction between old earthly life styles and new Christ-like life styles. Greed, explained as idolatry, is a part of the old life-style. We are taught to get rid of greed. We are encouraged to set our minds on things that are above—a higher way of thinking. A radical change of life-style is implied, as one committed to Christ's teaching, takes off an old T shirt, representing self-identity and

values, (the words on the shirt might read: “He who dies with the most toys, wins”), and puts on a new T shirt, (“Rich toward God and poor to the world”).

Changing shirts is a matter of life and death. It involves letting go of faith in material possessions, life styles of comfort and luxury and self-centered pleasure. And as the gap between rich and poor in our country expands and accelerates, we have our work cut out for us if we are to claim identity as alternative communities self-consciously seeking to reverse the trend and to distribute the great wealth God has given us in a more equitable and just system.

How can the church help us in our quest to become rich toward God? We must get to know each other at a deep enough level of intimacy and trust so that we can share our needs. A friend once told me about a financial crisis in her family that involved losing a job and health benefits at a time when a young child needed costly medical attention. Someone in the church heard the need and told my friend to send her the insurance bills until my friend was able to pay for them herself. Another friend told me about a member of a congregation where a woman heard about a young man in town who could not afford college. Behind the scenes the woman paid the tuition for his college education. You may have stories about how God has worked through your life or through someone else to meet important human needs.

I would love to see a comprehensive plan for ongoing small groups for the whole congregation, where we could really support one another’s spiritual journeys toward becoming rich toward God, as Jesus put it. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having possessions. Sin and separation begin to creep into our lives and relationships when our possessions possess us. Perhaps it is our fear that drives us to greed. Perhaps it is the insecurity that without the power money brings, people wouldn’t like us, or respect us, or do what we want them to.

It is a reasonable goal to build a nest egg and to work toward financial security in retirement. The rich man in Jesus’ story was doing just that. When his stock portfolio began to bulge, he asked a strategic spiritual question: “What should I do?” Along with that question is another equally significant question: “How much is enough?”

The cathedral may have reached that point in the stewardship of our God-given endowment. “What should we do?” “How much is enough?” We cannot hear God’s answer to these important questions apart from getting to know the needs of our sisters and brothers in this faith community, the city of Cincinnati, and the world. We do not possess our endowment. In some ways, it possesses us.

Henri Nouwen said, “If you would know God, stay close to the poor.” In one of his books he writes about the “nonpossessive” life:

“To be able to enjoy fully the many good things the world has to offer, we must be detached from them. To be detached does not mean to be indifferent or uninterested. It means to be nonpossessive. Life is a gift to be grateful for and not a property to cling to.

A nonpossessive life is a free life. But such freedom is only possible when we have a deep sense of belonging. To whom then do we belong? We belong to God, and the God to whom we belong has sent us into the world to proclaim in his name that all of creation is created in and by love and calls us to gratitude and joy. That is what the detached life is all about. It is a life in which we are free to offer praise and thanksgiving.” (*Bread for the Day*, Feb 20)

Hosea’s image of how God related to Israel reminds me of how God is with us to guide us on this risky spiritual journey from greed to generosity.

“I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.”

When is the last time you lifted an infant to your cheeks? I had that blessed privilege a few weeks ago when I held my new grandson, Tristan Cross Choi for the first time in Boston. The tenderness, the intimacy, the awesome realization that a life is totally in your hands, is overwhelming. And that is what it is like to come close to God, in vulnerability and total dependence, totally open to be snuggled and loved. For that moment, Tristan had nothing. He was totally powerless and helpless. He needed everything and I felt like his very life depended on me. I had everything, and wanted to give him my love. I long to love him. I want the best for him. Whatever he needs, I will try to give him.

And so it is with God. Waiting to give us all we need, especially love.