

Pentecost 11C Proper 14 Sermon 080810
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

In the name of the God of all that is; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

On Wednesday of last week, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, the second and third wealthiest men in the world, called a press conference and announced the launch of a project called “The Giving Pledge.” The story did not receive as much press coverage as the bad news of the day did. In fact, the evening newscast that Donna and I watched gave this story about 33 seconds. But from my perspective as not only a member of the Episcopal clergy, but also as a believing, practicing Christian, there was not a more newsworthy story in recent history.

The Giving Pledge began as a series of dinner conversations between Bill and Melinda Gates and Mr. Buffet, which spread to other talks with philanthropists around the world. As of August 4th, there were forty (40) billionaires who had signed letters, pledging to give a *majority* of their wealth away. There is no plan to pool all of the money and have some organization oversee it. In fact, there are no rules in The Giving Pledge about where the money has to go. The pledge is simply this: at some time in the future, each person promises to give the *majority* of their money away to some persons or organizations that do not financially benefit the families of the givers. The idea was that the wealthiest people in the world would give their money away – simply because they needed to.

There are two very important points to take away from this morning's Gospel.

First, God is ready and willing to give us the Kingdom.

And second, we need to be generous in our own giving in order to be ready to *accept* that Kingdom gift.

The Gospel passage this morning is a part of Luke's on-going narrative about stewardship. Last week we had the parable of the foolish rich man, who thought that building bigger storage facilities to hold his stuff would assure his soul of peace – until God came and told him that he would die that same night. That parable always reminds me of the old bumper sticker that said: The one who dies with the most toys wins. The theological response to which is: The one who dies with the most toys is still dead. That was Jesus' point in last week's parable.

Now this week we have a wonderful teaching in which Jesus says:

Do not be afraid, ... for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Don't be afraid of what? The simple answer is: death. The more complex answer is all of the ambiguity and paradox that surround our seeking after – and ownership of – stuff. Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, ... for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” In other words, God has seen fit to give us God's own kingdom. Everything else we have – or will *ever* get – seems cheap by comparison. So why worry about the cheap stuff when the most valuable is already taken care of.

Then Jesus goes on to explain how we get to the point of accepting the Kingdom:

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Make no mistake here. Jesus was not talking about some great mansion in the sky. He was not talking about doing without here on earth so that you can be humble enough to enter the Kingdom of God when you die. I told you a couple of weeks ago that the Gospel message is not just about eternal life and your “just rewards” when you’re dead. It is about the here and now. It is about the Kingdom of God being *here* right *now*.

So why would Jesus have told His audience to sell its goods and give alms to the poor in order to be ready to accept the Kingdom freely given by the Father? There is a story about Mother Teresa that helps give us an answer to that question.

Once she was visiting Australia. A young Franciscan monk was assigned to escort her. He was thrilled to have an opportunity to learn from such a famous person, but was disappointed to find that she was always surrounded by people. He had little opportunity to talk to her. He was disappointed.

Mother Teresa was scheduled to fly to New Guinea, so the young friar asked, ‘If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, may I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?’

Mother Teresa asked, ‘You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?’ The young man said that he did.

She said, ‘Then give that money to the poor. You’ll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.’

When we are generous to people who need help, God blesses us with a glad heart. When we are generous, we discover that our lives have purpose. When we give, we love the fact that we are making a positive difference in someone’s life. The key to a happy

life is not spending ... or even saving. The key to a happy life is giving.¹ Dr. Karl Menninger once said, “Money-giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill people.” Another way of putting that is, “The door to happiness swings outward².”

We have all given something to someone else – either what (for us) was a substantial sum of money, or a gift of value which was costly to us. And in that act of giving we have *received* the most wondrous of gifts ... an almost indescribable feeling of gladness and wholeness in our hearts. *That* is the Kingdom of God. That wholeness of heart and genuine joy *is* the indicator that the Kingdom is among us.

Peter Peterson, one of the billionaires participating in The Giving Pledge explained why he was involved.

As I watched and learned from my father's example, I noticed how much pleasure his giving to others gave him. Indeed, today, I get much more pleasure giving money ... than making the money in the first place.³

And it does not stop at simply having a warm glow inside when you give a gift. Giving part of our wealth away serves the purpose of helping us be less afraid. Jesus said, “Do not be afraid,” Do not be afraid of where your money is; whether or not it's earning the maximum it can earn; whether or not someone is going to steal it; whether or not it will last as long as you want it to. Give it away and the anxiety goes away with it. That is one of the things that is striking to missionaries when they visit Haiti. They leave their

¹ Paraphrased from Will Willemon

² Søren Kierkegaard

³ Peter G. Peterson – media interview regarding The Giving Pledge, August 4, 2010

lives of anxiety and stress (mostly over financial matters) and go to one of the poorest places on earth, only to find people who are incredibly happy and thankful for what little they have.

In the press release on Wednesday, Warren Buffet said,

Too often, a vast collection of possessions ends up possessing its owner. The asset I most value, aside from health, is interesting, diverse, and long-standing friends.⁴

We who are church-going people would agree with Mr. Buffet but might express differently what we value most.

As we prepare for the Eucharist in a few minutes, people will bring the bread and wine down the aisle and they will be placed on the altar; just as happened in the early Church when people would bring their gifts of bread and wine from home and all of them would be laid on the altar and blessed to God's use, before they were distributed back to God's people to sustain them in their work. That is what Jesus calls on us to do today, and every day.

Bring the generous gifts you give in thanks and recognition of the God who gave everything to you have and everything you are. Along with those gifts, bring your fears, failures and anxieties – and lay them all on the altar. When you do, God will bless every bit of it – the fears; the anxieties; the failures; the gracious and generous gifts. And then,

⁴ Warren Buffet – media interview regarding The Giving Pledge, August 4, 2010

in the power of the Spirit, God will put it all to work spreading the Kingdom far and wide.

Do not be afraid, Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Amen.