

## **Faces of Discipleship: The Open-Handed**

*A sermon preached on Luke 12:13-21 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on August 4, 2019*

### I.

Indian priest Anthony de Mello said the story went something like this:

“A rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find a Southern fisherman lying leisurely beside his boat. ‘Why aren’t you fishing?’ asked the industrialist.

‘Because I have caught enough fish for the day,’ said the fisherman.

‘Why don’t you catch some more?’

‘What would I do with them?’

‘You could earn more money,’ said the industrialist. ‘With that, you could fix a motor to your boat, go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough money to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats... maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me.’

‘What would I do then?’

‘Then you could really enjoy life.’

‘What do you think I am doing right now?’ said the fisherman.”<sup>1</sup>

### II.

From one parable to another, today we find ourselves talking about everyone’s favorite topic to hear about at church — money. (Am I right?!) We spent some time in my Sunday School class this morning talking about all the

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<sup>1</sup> Story from Anthony de Mello retold in *Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, p293

things we've been taught about money over our lifetimes – don't talk about money (ha!), money is the root of all evil, don't ever lend money to friends or family, you'll never have enough for retirement so you better save everything you have.<sup>2</sup> To that today, we look at money that comes from inheritance, money that earns a living, money that is saved and stored and stuck, money that creates behaviors of closed fists and self-focus, money that Jesus invites us to examine and consider in order that we might become 'rich toward God.'

We pick up shortly after we left off in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus and his disciples are traveling around Galilee sharing good news with those they meet. They have amassed quite a crowd of followers, and from that crowd, a brother hollers out to Jesus: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." A reasonable request, as rabbis and teachers would commonly receive invitation to adjudicate or pass judgment upon ethical matters such as these. It's reasonable too because a family's inheritance was intended to be divided between siblings. Seems to me like the man was just asking for his fair share, what was owed him, what was rightfully his to have.

But before we continue on, we're reminded that the Gospel of Luke also gives us the Magnificat of Mary, the first sermon of Jesus where good news is brought to the poor and liberation to the oppressed, and countless stories of last and least bearing the image and face of God. We'd be wise to remember that Luke has a particularly sharp ethic of sensitivity to those in poverty, which we hold firmly in mind when hearing Jesus's response: "take care! Be

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<sup>2</sup> With thanks to the GAP Class for their feedback!

on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then Jesus tells him a parable, one that history and study has dubbed ‘the parable of the rich fools.’ You know the story — the man who became rich from the land, whose original barns weren’t big enough for all he wanted to store, who dialogued with himself about what to do and came to the conclusion to tear down the barns and build bigger ones. “Relax, eat, drink, and be merry!” he says. It’s one of Luke’s four parables of exemplary behavior, a story that comes surrounded by warnings against covetousness and greed, faith in the face of anxieties around what is needed in daily life, like food and clothes.<sup>3</sup>

You know, it could be so easy to read this parable and think to ourselves, “this guy’s not so bad! He’s working, he’s planning, he’s saving, he’s securing his future, he’s figuring out how best to protect and preserve what he has... heck, he may be planning ahead for kids and grandkids for all we know. This is just good sense — prudent and sober and thoughtful, even. What’s so wrong with that?”<sup>4</sup>

### III.

In her treatise on the relationship we share with our resources called *The Soul of Money*, Lynne Twist shares words to her readers from her own mentor, encouraging us ‘to be known for what you allocate, not what you accumulate.’<sup>5</sup> She too understands the way that wealth in whatever form can

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<sup>3</sup> Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, p106.

<sup>4</sup> Hultgren makes these fine points in his exposition of the parable, p109.

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money*, p104.

become burdensome, that excess encumbers, that our holdings can hold us back from participating in dynamic movement of life.

For in her words, “just as blood in the body must flow to all parts of the body for health to be maintained, money is useful when it is moving and flowing, contributed and shared, directed and invested in that which is life affirming. When blood slows down and begins to stop or clot, the body becomes sick. When water slows down and becomes stagnant, it becomes toxic. Accumulating and holding large quantities of money can have the same toxic effect in our lives.”<sup>6</sup>

Yes. Yes. Because as you remember, Jesus doesn’t condemn the man for his success or his riches, which should relieve some of us and frustrate others.<sup>7</sup> Rather through the parable of the rich fool, Jesus warns the brother about the sneaky nature of greed, warning about money held or accumulated or stored up, warning about what it does to the posture of one’s life, warning about the ways it grabs hold of one’s life and energies and love.

And in this, we hear an invitation from Jesus — to live an open-handed life. For to live an open-handed life is to value the flow more than the stash, honoring surrender more than saving. To live an open-handed life recognizes that anything we can capture in our hand wasn’t ours in the first place, is ours to shepherd for a season, and won’t be ours in the end. To live an open-handed life means we put our energies less on a prideful, nearly-narcissistic obsession with “my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul,” and more

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p105.

<sup>7</sup> A good reminder from Peter Gomes, “When Too Much Is Not Enough,” *Sermons*, p64.

on how we can live a life rich toward God. To live an open-handed life is to live an open-hearted life.

So what might it look like to live an open-handed life “rich toward God”? Perhaps it means first giving thanks to the One from whom all blessings flow, noticing those whose barns are falling down, those with no barns at all, those whose grain job was lost last year, those who work to till the fields for someone else’s grain, those for whom all the grain in the world cannot stem their hungers and doing something about that. To live an open-handed life holds the holy honor to participate in the sacred flow of the Spirit’s energy in the world. To live an open-handed life is to love who and what and how God loves.

#### IV.

It seems that the fictional but enigmatic Ebenezer Scrooge, who hoarded his resources in life and has the opportunity to confront those patterns in a dream of death, wasn’t the only one with such an invitation. For one quiet morning in 1888, Alfred Nobel awoke and read his own obituary. Nobel, you see, was the inventor of dynamite, who spent his whole life amassing wealth from weapons of mass destruction. The paper called him “the dynamite king,” proclaiming widely: “Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday. The merchant of death is dead!” The problem, of course, is that this French newspaper mistook Alfred’s brother’s death for his own. A simple mistake of a reporter confusing the names of Alfred and Ludvig shook Alfred to his core. “Is that all I am?” he asked himself, “is the purpose of my life merely to be known as ‘the dynamite king’? What about all the ways I’ve tried to bring

people together across barriers and borders, or the other inventions to spur on humanity's creativity? In the end, *is that all I am* – the merchant of death? Is that how I'll be remembered?"

This moment of truth for Alfred Nobel, this very day when his life was demanded of him, changed his life. He wanted to make clear to the world the values and intent and purpose of his life. So in his last will and testament, Alfred Nobel left his legacy to be named the Nobel Peace Prize, the most valued award across the world for those who have done the most for the cause of peace.<sup>8</sup> At the end of his life, Alfred Nobel opened his hands.

#### V.

Brothers and sisters, we have to ask ourselves – what will it take for us to live an open-handed, open-hearted life? What will it take for us to clothe ourselves with compassion? What will it take for us to examine in all seasons how we are living rich towards God? What will it take for us to face all we are carrying and storing out of fear so that we might grasp all those who God would have you to hold?

What would it take? We might just start by opening our hands.

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<sup>8</sup> Story as told by Peter Rhea Jones in his book *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, p156; quoting the original source "Reading Your Own Obituary," by Robert Raines. Ironically enough, I had never heard this story until hearing it from a friend one night this week... then reading it in my weekly study two days later. The coincidence was too strong not to proclaim!

Episcopal priest Ian Morgan Cron on communion: “Remember, friends, you never take communion. It can only be received. Taking is what happened inn the Garden of Eden. But opening our hands to receive will put the world back together,”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As quoted by Aaron Niequist in his book *The Eternal Current*, p89.