

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: Mark 7:24-37

9 September 2018



It is one of the few regrets of my life that I now don't own part of a dairy herd in north-east India. Had I had the foresight I needed at that time, Amos, my would-be business partner, and I, might today be proud owners who knows how many Friesians roaming the bucolic foothills of the Himalayas.

Amos was what Nepalis call a 'Chowki Dawa'. There were probably about twenty of them at the school I lived and worked at in India. His primary duty, aside from making tea, and teaching me a very limited range of Nepali words, was to ring the school bell, signaling the start and end of each lesson. Most chowki dawas were poor. They lived in the 'bustee', a makeshift village further up the hillside, perching dwellings 5000 feet up, often made of salvaged tin for the roof and scrap wood for the walls. They had lived for generations, watching the English and then the Bengalis come and settle and dominate the socio-economic landscape, leaving many who were indigenous to the hill country locked in a hereditary cycle of illiteracy and prejudice. With so much historical struggle over the right to land in that part of India, the one sure thing that many families knew they could pass on to the next generation was their poverty, and it always struck me as a stark irony that people who enjoyed such an expansive vista from their makeshift front yards of the longest continuous view of the Himalayas on earth, had the most limiting of economic outlooks open to them.

So, I do regret, now, not investing with Amos in a cow. I think he chose to approach me because I was known among several of the workers there as a good option for a small loan or a gift of money. I earned about \$800 a year, yet there never seemed to be a limit to the number of times that the school bursar would allow me an advance on my next month's wages, so I could pass on some of it to somebody else who needed one thing or another. Some medicine here, some fuel for the home there. Yet when Amos came to make his offer, it just felt like one ask too many, even though I imagine I could have found a way to make it work. For him, it might have been a way out, a step up. I regret that I could not see that then as I see it now. He had offered me mutuality, and I had failed to recognize it for what it was.

Mutuality lies at the heart of so much of what it means to be Christian, and within that core of our vocation is the profound challenge we face as followers of Jesus with what we are to do with our remarkable wealth in the context of a global economic order that places us right at the top. The readings from scripture that we heard this morning hit us squarely between the eyes with exactly this challenge. Proverbs, so often a rather pithy and peculiar sort of biblical text, is plain and clear in its 22nd chapter telling us that rich and poor share a common bond, that the Lord our God is maker of them all, and that generosity is marked by sharing our bread with those who lack it. What's more, the converse is not just bad form - to rob the poor because they are poor and so have little defense against such exploitation - it is to risk the judgement of God, as the author of Proverbs writes, 'for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them'.

It's probably not something that most of us usually think about, is it, when we do our shopping at the grocery store: how it was that that chocolate or that coffee or that produce made it to our shelves. We don't tend to ask what our complicity might be in the despoilment of the poor. It's not what we have been conditioned to do. Yet as the

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disparity of the world's economy presses ever more upon us in a global village that struggles for dignity for more of its inhabitants, our scriptures have the capacity to speak to us in ways that were made to challenge us. After all, our forebears didn't leave us these holy texts to make us feel comfortable with the world as it is, did they? To the contrary, the Bible is a book intended to unseat our assumptions, written where most of us were not born and raised, from the underside of global economic history.

So how might we grow in our awareness of the common bond that rich and poor share as the beloved of one loving creator? I suppose for me, the lesson learned when I look back on the years I spent living in parts of the global south, is how significant it was for me to orient myself within the life of others. The trend that I noticed in each of those experiences was how much closer together life was lived, as if the distance between us was somehow reduced not only in sharing a more common life of power cuts, water shortages, and monsoonal blues, but in the genuine recognition that I had need for proximity. For as much as I may have tried and as with my friend Amos, failed to extend mutuality to others, those contexts curated for me a life together that has left me forever enriched by a spaciousness that always seemed to have room for more and with it room for me.

Like James' admonition to the readers of his letter, sharing the one table, one space of hospitality that is spendthrift in its generosity, which was so often my experience in impoverished communities and families both materially and relationally, has the power to remind us in deep and profoundly moving ways that we are all called to be heirs, with the poor, of God's utterly spacious kingdom. It took for me to dwell among the life of the poor in those places to be able to see how much I needed to learn how to live in mutuality with my neighbor. I might be a slow learner, or there might be something in that for all of us. Could it be that our relative affluence keeps us at a distance from one another in ways that we don't necessarily intend? After all, the 'royal law', as James names it, is not a love we are meant to feel toward our neighbor over the proverbial garden fence, rather it is a love born out of proximate kind of life, one close enough for our neighbor to actually reach us, and change us from the inside out.

It seems to me that a greater mutuality is one of the beautiful possibilities that a community like this one lays open for us. Here, in this community of our faith, we are offered the opportunity to learn how to live closer to others, not perhaps for most of us within the context of poverty in our material lives, but in seeking the riches of a divine intimacy we find in another, and in doing so redressing the balance of a consumer society's poverty of the heart. For the kingdom of God is an intimate space for our belonging and even more a space for our becoming who we are called to be.

We know this to be so because Jesus demonstrates this truth over and over in the gospels. In the house where he had hoped to hide out, in Tyre, most likely more well-to-do than his own Galilean social experience, it is only when a desperate mother gets close enough to meet him eye to eye that the life-giving power of the kingdom is dispensed and the Syrophenician daughter is made well. Similarly, isn't there just a beauty to the closeness of the scene that sees Jesus take the deaf and barely verbal man aside, placing his fingers in the deaf man's ears and putting his spit on the man's tongue. What does Jesus teach us? That proximity heals, even as much as that proximity is hard to grow into.

As you and I celebrate today the myriad of ways that our ministries of the gospel of that same Jesus might be lived out through the life and mission of this church, I encourage you to look for such openings for proximity, and intimacy, and mutuality here. Perhaps one such opportunity is calling on your life today? Might God be beckoning you to come to grow in relationship with those who entered this country as refugees, or with those who struggle as internally displaced persons on our own city's streets, lost to poverty and addiction and broken relationships?

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Or perhaps this life of faith we profess and share on this block in word and song, in our learning and fellowship, might be one that propels you to seek out an ever greater proximity to people beyond this parish, here in Atlanta and in far-off places across the world?

For you and I are called to learn evermore deeply how to give ourselves away into the lives of others. As the great liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, writes, 'we drink from our own wells', from a boundless and divine source of life, that not only orients us to recognize God's preferential option for the poor, but empowers us to love as we have been loved by the God who will always love us more. So, be spendthrift givers, my brothers and sisters in Christ, give yourself away to the glory of the one who gives everything for you. There is so much we will discover in the rich feast of our mutuality. May God bless you as you dare to follow him.

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