

Proper 23, October 14, 2012 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I have a collection of parker pen and pencil sets - maybe 30 sets! Each set is the same style - "Insignia" but different colors. Some have logos on them. For instance, one has a whistle logo - meaning it was made from the remains of destroyed Pershing missiles - it's a "world peace" set.

On thing's for sure: with all these pens I should never have to buy a refill again! Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "sell it all?"

Show camera + lenses (one of 5 cameras I own). Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "sell it all?"

what about my car? My house? The stuff I have in storage?

It looks like Jesus is saying just that to me, about me, because I'm rich! I am. Compared to the rest the world: I – we – subsist on 75 times the amount of money that those in the poorest countries. We're all rich. Even the poorest of us is rich beyond the wildest imaginings of the poor. In fact many children in this country receive more in pocket money than whole families subsist on – or fail to – in the global south.

So it's not just me who's rich. We're all rich – financially – who are here today.....in comparison...!

So are these words of Jesus to the young man also words to us? "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."?

The answer is, "it depends"! Let's look at the story:

First, we really have to be cautious about assigning a purely economic interpretation to this story – even though, in stewardship season ("The Annual beg-a-thon", as our bishop calls it), many preachers will do just that.

Next is the question of who this "young man" is that Jesus "loved". The Greek says that he's little more than a youth – young enough to be unmarried, to have less areas of responsibility. Young enough, in other words, to let go of things.

And Jesus "loved" him? "Love" in Mediterranean culture is appropriately translated as "attachment" in an active and practical way. The youth's claim that he lived a well rounded moral life "since my youth" stirs Jesus' affection toward the lad to the degree that he would like to have the young man join him as his disciples.

The "join him as one of his disciples" is crucial here. Would Jesus have said one could be a faithful believer without giving away "everything" and following him? Of course!

To be a literal disciple, to join Jesus' inner group, the young man was being asked to give up and

give away:

- give up what were considered the most valuable, most precious of all possessions in the 1st century Mediterranean world, all of which revolved around relationships: family, home, and land. Literally Jesus meant leave your family, give up your family home, give up your family land – in other words, cut your family ties, only then can you be free to follow me.
- and give away, meaning literal wealth as we understand it.

To be this sort of disciple is to be called to a higher standard. When think of where in the church I see this sort of behavior I think primarily of monastic communities – monks and nuns who take vows of poverty.

But to be called as a follower? As a person of faith trying to live out the spirit of the gospel message of care and compassion for the poor, the lost, the lonely, “the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the alien” – to quote our Jewish ancestors? For one thing, if we did give it all away we’d end up with the poor and while we might alleviate some suffering for some people for some short time, the problem will just come back. Even Jesus knew this – he told us that we will always have the poor with us.

Jesus call for us isn’t primarily cashing in one’s stock portfolio, emptying the bank account, and disposing of other similar Western 21st century treasures.

Phew! So the pens are safe? Maybe!

What Jesus was asking of the young man was, in the 1st century where family was everything, nothing short of social suicide. That’s why he talks about compensation – “treasures in heaven”, and a new community, a new family to replace his family of flesh and blood. **This is what Jesus has been creating throughout this gospel.**

The young man certainly ‘got’ that Jesus wanted him to join the group and be a disciple, and he clearly understood the sacrifice Jesus demanded (but would replace). With regret and sorrow, he rejects both of Jesus’ offers and departs, “for he had great possessions.”

He left. Now the disciples start to wonder themselves – they want to know about the rich. And for us, this is a crucial point – **understanding what those in the ancient Mediterranean world meant by the word “rich”**– because that **changes this story**. **If you listen to Jesus words he’s clear that possessions aren’t the problem for this man. It was his unwillingness to share them** – to give to those who had less than he (“the poor”) – **that caused the problem. He’s making a distinction between “rich” and “greedy rich”**. This young man was not simply rich but also “greedy” (cf. Luke 12:13-21).

What Jesus was talking about, wasn’t someone who was rich, but who was rich and greedy.

So the pens are safe - and so is the camera!

But! What does it mean to be rich but not greedy? At least two things come to me:

1. First, being willing to embrace an ethical vision of living where the water of baptism holds more relational power than the blood of family – where living out of that vision of a community of pilgrims is a defining feature of our lives – this is one of the markers of being a Christian; and
2. Second, being willing to share our riches is a fundamental marker of what it means to be a Christian. The biblical standard of generosity is the tithe. That starts at 10% (notice I said “starts”! My tithe to St. Augustine’s for 2013 is 12.5% of my pre-tax income – around \$9,000). Now we have to be careful here: 10% of Bill Gates’ annual income is meaningless to Bill Gates. 10% of the income of a retired widow who never worked outside the home is a huge sum of money. Be sensible! But – and this is a big “but”! – a tithe is not zero.

So this story turns out to be very helpful for us in understanding what we’re called by Jesus to do and be: generous but not obsessively so; and committed to a community vision dedicated to helping the four great symbols of Judeo-Christian ministry: the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the alien.

Fundamentally, Jesus is telling us that our lives must be about discipleship, a discipleship that begins with baptism, and continues as long as we draw a breath. May it be ever so, for us.