

Proper 18C
Luke 14.25-33
September 8 2013
St. Augustine's Freeland

Blessed be the Name of God

Annie Proulx has written two collections of short stories about life in Wyoming. The prize-winning author of *The Shipping News*, *That Old Ace in the Hole* and *Accordion Crimes*, entitled the second volume of these short stories, *Bad Dirt*. In an essay in this collection, she reports the following scene:

In Sheridan Wyoming, Gilbert Wolfscale was taking his mother home from a doctor's visit. The reason she had to see the doctor was that she had sat so long at the breakfast table at home that her left leg had fallen asleep and when she got up to move across the room, she fell and broke her hip. Her doctor's visits had been rather frequent after that but that was about to change.

As she rode next to her son in his truck, going home, she said, "I don't have to go back there but a few more times, looks like, and thank heaven. Some a the strangest people sittin in that waitin room. These two women got talking about their Bible class. Sounded pretty modern, you know, tryin to link the Bible to nowadays. But the Bible class *they* went to was tryin a guess how it would be if Jesus showed up in Sheridan. That got them all excited and there they set, what would he do for work. They both said he could easy find a job workin construction.

Would he have his own house and would it be like a trailer or a regular house or a apartment? Then they got at the furniture, what kind of furniture would Jesus pick for his place. And you know how you get thinking about things you overhear? Wasn't none of my business but there I set, crazy as they was, wonderin if he'd pick out a maple rockin chair or a sofa with Scotchgard fabric or what." [76]

Laid in a manger or majestically risen, healing the sick or playing hide and seek with demons, or buying a Lazy-Boy at a furniture store in Sheridan Wyoming, this is the one to whom we have pledged ourselves—Mary's boy, Jesus. It's a curious business, really, perfectly sensible people like us, regular people, pledged to Jesus. Strange, isn't it? Wonderful, perhaps, but strange—given what he asks of us.

Listen: Jesus said: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciples." He goes on to say, "...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." [Lk 14.26, 33]

Jesus has some hard things to say--about greed and money, about the human family. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. [Lk 12.15] "You cannot serve God and wealth." [Mt 6.24b] And what about the directive to the rich young man that he give away all that he has, so as to follow.[Mk 10.21] Deny yourself. Be on your guard against all

kinds of greed. "...none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions." [Lk 14.33] He suggests giving away all your family as well. Sigh...

As you know, Amy and I are retired. She from hospital chaplaincy; me from seminary teaching. Some years ago, anticipating our retirement, we sought advice from a financial planner. We assembled our information, as she requested, and sat with her on several occasions, hoping to get a clear picture of what we might expect when retirement came, and, even at that late date, how to enhance our holdings.

As we talked, and she asked more and more probing questions, she began to get a fix on me and my attitude toward money. She told me that I had been sprinkled with 'Depression Dust.' That is, even tho' I was not born in the 30's and cannot rightly claim to be a child of the depression, nonetheless I was still covered with the fright and anxiety about money that the Great Depression bred into a generation of my forbears.

I had to admit the truth of what she said, whether I like the idea or not. What I said to her, perhaps in an effort to defend or explain myself, was that I did not want a lot, I just wanted enough. The aim was not abundance. It was sufficiency. But here, of course, she had me. The 'Depression Dust' put in me, a fright and an anxiety that caused 'sufficiency' to be an insufficient idea. The sufficient protection of 'enough' was very slippery and hard to find. When I go to the dust of my

grave, I will likely take this 'Depression Dust' with me. I doubt that I'll ever shake it.

Sufficiency...enough...is it greed? Could be. Doesn't speak well of denying myself, does it?

This sort of talk about denying oneself and greed—holding money, acquiring things—this is tiring stuff to talk about. In our society, in our system, greed, acquisition, having more than enough or wanting more than enough—that's what makes us tick, whether God likes it or not. And frankly, I suspect that talk about it—my talk, anybody's talk—this kind of talk really isn't going to cut it. It's not going to get hold of us the way Jesus hopes we'll be got hold of! My guilt about what I have or want is not blunted by this kind of talk—even when I speak it to myself. I am not in this way dislodged from my greed. I'm not startled or awakened into denying myself.

In the end, what Jesus is concerned about here, and in other places like it, is not really or only material things, not earthly relations. It is not about matter as if it were evil. The creation story itself reports to us that creation, all creation, is, in the eyes of God, good. It's not matter or things that concern Jesus. It's not 'stuff,' *per se*. It's not even other people. What concerns Jesus, truly, in these hard sayings, is the loss of God. Holding on, owning, possessing, having so tightly, with such force and persuasion, that God is lost, holding so fiercely that God cannot be held. Hence, the admonition to let go, to let go of everything.

If we had a quiet moment together, one in which we could settle our hearts; one in which we could talk about things that matter most, I would ask you to think about whatever there is in your life that is underneath all the other things. What supports everything else? When ‘eventually’ comes, what do you want to have, who do you want to have? It’s to this level that Jesus wants us to get. The ‘underneath,’ ‘before everything else,’ ‘eventually’ stage—and then he wants to talk to us about the loss of God.

Amy and I live in a rural middle class neighborhood four miles north of Langley. We have lovely plantings and grow some of our own food. We also feed lots of birds and provide them with bathing facilities, plus our share of deer and bunnies.

We have collected wonderful art that we display very well and to our great delight. We care for our house thoughtfully and with tenderness. It’s a place for us and for all our friends—the people we love to feed and whose love we need so much.

Jesus wants to talk to me about my house and holding on—about the loss of God.

A few summers ago, Amy and I were in a shopping area in Austin one Saturday morning. As we walked past the shop of one of our dear friends, and one of Austin’s finest photographers, Nancy Whitworth, we saw a sign hung over the studio door. It read ‘Hat Days.’ In the courtyard of the shop, there were several racks of hats—all sorts and

kinds—and there were children working their way through the collection. When they found the right one, they'd put it on and Nancy, the photographer, would take a set of photos of the child. What a treasure!!

Amy, as if somehow drawn magically and magnetically by the hat rack itself, began to work her way through the hats, playfully trying on this one and that. When Nancy finished the last child for the morning, she called to Amy, "Come here, let me take your picture."

Embarrassed and sputtering "I don't have on any make-up," Amy sat herself down and Nancy proceeded to take what proved to be the most wonderful and dear photos I have even seen of my wonderful and dear wife. More than virtually anything else I have, those pictures are at the heart of things.

Jesus wants to talk to me about those pictures—and the loss of God.

Early last July, Fiona Josephine Adams was eleven years old. About three weeks ago, in late August, her big sister, Violet Isabel Adams turned thirteen. They are our granddaughters. Born to my son Mike and his wife, Amy, these girls are all the things that grandparents claim their grandchildren to be—tho' in our case those things are true!

When they were younger, they found my beard intriguing and my glasses pure delight. We became friends from the very beginning. Amy and I were in the room next door when Violet was born, and I stayed with her the night that her parents were away, birthing her sister. In the

structure of the whole world, they are entirely precious—and to us, I simply cannot tell you!

Jesus wants to talk to me, and my Beloved, about Violet and Fiona—and the loss of God.

You see, it's not about cold and principled things that Jesus wants to talk to us. No, he wants our attention about the things and people that matter, no matter what. And he reminds us that God matters more.

Whatever we hold most dear in this life, this life of things and love and deepest meaning, whatever we hold most dear, Jesus wants us to hold God more dearly; to know and to admit that everything in life has a past tense. Every good house, every lover, every grandchild, every 'thing,' every life—they all come to an end. So, hard as it is to say, they must all be held very lightly, very lightly indeed. Everything in life and everyone in life has a past tense; everything will pass into the past tense and pass away, everything and everyone except God. And finally and at the end, our future is with God.

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