

“The Wisdom of Generosity”
March 26, 2023

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10
Matthew 6:1-4

This morning I’m wrapping up my Lenten preaching from Ecclesiastes—although I think we will continue to find some wisdom for uncertain times when we turn to the story of Jesus’ Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem a week from now.

If you’ve been listening to the scripture lessons these Sundays in Lent, if you’ve been reading the Lenten reflections that come out each morning, or if you’ve been part of the study of Ecclesiastes on Wednesday evenings, you know that this book presents challenges for understanding and interpretation—is it ultimately pessimistic or optimistic, is it instruction or observation?

In terms of challenges, this morning’s reading doesn’t disappoint.

But I think it also yields some wisdom.

“Send out your bread upon the waters,” we are told. “For after many days you will get it back.” Those words are familiar, but what do they mean? How do we understand this advice? Many people have made many suggestions.

Louis May Alcott offered a positive interpretation, I guess, when she said: “Cast your bread upon the waters, and after many days it will come back buttered.” Not only bread, but butter as well. That’s got to be an improvement, right?

On the other hand, Don King—O.K., I know, neither a biblical scholar nor a theologian—Don King both encouraged and warned us, saying: “If you cast your bread upon the water and you have faith, you’ll get back cash. If you don’t have faith, you’ll get soggy bread.” Maybe so.

I still wasn’t sure what any of this meant, so I turned to some who actually are biblical scholars.

They suggest this could be some sound investing advice from a time of economic volatility, when trade between nations was being spurred on by the introduction of currency. So, the New English Bible offers this translation: “Send your *grain across the seas*, and in time you will get a return,” adding that second verse, “Divide your merchandise among seven ventures, or eight maybe, since you do not know what disasters may occur on earth.” Sound advice, perhaps, but it seems like something that might come from the Tippie College of Business instead of its neighbor, the Department of Religious Studies up on the fourth floor of Gilmore Hall.

While advising overseas trade and a diversified portfolio might have been helpful at the time Ecclesiastes was written, given the unstable economic condition of those times, and while such advice *might* be of use to us today—please note the small print, I am not a financial advisor—what the author is really commending here is a spirit of “spontaneity in the face of uncertainty,”¹ a spirit of liberality.

As this book draws to its close, we learn of the wisdom of generosity.

“Go, eat your bread with enjoyment,” we heard last Sunday. Throughout Ecclesiastes, “bread” is both a form of sustenance and an occasion for joy. And it is for us today as well.

Bread is the minimum nourishment necessary for human life. It is the opposite of hunger. Throughout the Bible bread serves as a sign of God's care and love for us in this world. And Jesus invites us to pray for it daily.

Martin Luther took that invitation and ran with it, developing a rather extensive list to explain the meaning of “bread.” It included *all* food, *and* drink, and clothes, shoes, houses, farms, fields, land, money, property, a good marriage, good children, honest public servants, a just government, favorable weather, health, honors, good friends and loyal neighbors. Since Luther others have agreed that we can think of “our daily bread” in the widest sense of the term. Certainly we could quickly expand this list to include other necessities for our contemporary lives.

Eat your bread with enjoyment.

Much of the joy of life comes not simply when we receive our bread but when we share it with others. Perhaps, then, in the words “Divide your means seven ways, or even eight,” we can hear not so much advice about diversifying our assets as diversifying our giving: “*Give a portion to seven, or even eight,*” is a good literal rendering of the Hebrew.

What were the words that Thornton Wilder gave to Dolly Levi? “Money is like manure. It’s not worth a thing until you spread it around.”

And, you know, in a way, at Congregational UCC, we generally regard money in that way. We tend to spread it around. Our giving goes here and there. In case what we give to the Community Crisis Center Food Bank doesn’t help provide enough food, well, we also work at and support the Free Lunch Program and the Agape Café so that people might find a meal there. And just to be on the safe side, we support Table to Table, so if there is still a need, it might be that they will fill it. “Give a portion to seven or even eight—because you don’t know what will happen.” We “don’t know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”

Because of this we spread the money around.

In an uncertain world—in *our* uncertain world—wisdom calls us to liberality and generosity.

Of course, I think you know this already. I’m just reminding you of the wisdom that you already have. After all, we are people who have listened carefully as Jesus says: “*When* you give,” not *if*. Along with Ecclesiastes, Jesus tells us that our giving is a part of living, our generosity is a sign that we are following in his way.

While these words are often read at the beginning of Lent, giving is not limited to 40 days during the year.

Yes, beyond these walls, we are often told to get more and more. We are told that the one who dies with the most toys, wins. But what we’ve been hearing from Ecclesiastes, of course, tells us that the one who dies with the most toys, still dies. We are invited—even now—to reexamine what we call winning and living.

Liberality—generosity—is a foundational part of our heritage, built upon the knowledge that each person is made in the image of God. Out of this deep faith, we call on our political and religious institutions to be generous. Out of this deep faith, we call each of us as individuals to the same generosity.

Marilynne Robinson makes this clear in that troubling essay, “Open Wide Thy Hand: Moses and the Origin of American Liberalism.” You can find in her collection *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. Marilynne isn’t always troubling, as you well know. But I must tell you, it is some of her most disturbing writing.

For John Calvin in Geneva, for the Puritans in New England and their spiritual descendants, *liberal* Christianity was just that: generous, giving, caring for the poor and the needy in their midst. Marilynne gives us Jonathan Edwards saying: “It does not answer the rules of Christian charity, to relieve only those who are reduced to extremity,” and “It is too obvious to be denied, that there are in fact persons so in want, that it would be a charitable act in us to help them, notwithstanding all that is done by the town.” I would recommend that you read this entire essay, but only with the warning that you will forever be haunted by it when you walk through downtown Iowa City.

Maybe this is why Jesus talked more about money and possessions than about almost anything else. A lack of generosity can distort our vision and warp our values. It can keep us from seeing the image of God in each human being. It can keep us from seeing that the earth is God’s. It can keep us from seeing that all that we have is simply entrusted to us for a time—that we are, indeed, *stewards* of many good gifts—none of which will last forever, none of which will be ours forever.

What we hear, from Jesus, however, is not a call to poverty. Jesus invites us to wisely use what we have and to give up whatever it is that holds us captive or impoverishes so that we might know true freedom and true wealth—storing up treasure in heaven is how he puts it. Remember that when he talks this way, Jesus is pointing toward the great value of this earth and of our life *before* we die.

And that, of course, is also the concern of Ecclesiastes: making the most of these days that we are given, rejoicing in the all the years that we have, enjoying the sweet light of day and the pleasant sight of the sun.

I once heard a woman speaking about a program for poor children that she directed. She was speaking because, in part, she was interested in “raising money” for this group. So, she stunned me when she said: “The money helps. But it only goes so far. What’s really important are your prayers.”

Wow.

Money alone is not what changes lives—the generous love and patience and persistence of people does.

Money alone is not what feeds the hungry in the developing world and in Iowa City—the liberal sweat and effort of people does.

Money alone does not give us hope in the face of illness or trouble—the abundant prayers and companionship of members of this church have carried many of us through valleys of shadows.

A liberal spirit will be generous with all things—with love and patience, with sweat and effort, with prayer and companionship.

Sounding somewhat like Ecclesiastes, the poet Marge Piercy advises:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

There is still much wisdom that we need. There is still much wisdom that we might gain as we look once again at Jesus in the coming days as he arrives in Jerusalem to find himself.

But we will have made a good start if we live out the wisdom of generosity that might very well be the ultimate wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

¹ C.L. Seow, "Theology When Everything Is Out of Control," *Interpretation*, July 2001, pg. 245.