

04.08.2019
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Introduction

In my hometown, horses pull carriages of tourists through the park while wearing blinders: black squares of cloth attached on the side of the horse's eyes to prevent them from seeing anything off to the side or behind. When in conflict, we might don these blinders. We might see only what is directly ahead.

For our Gospel reading today, we hear about a conflict and a demand for justice. Jesus' response, however, takes us inward, drawing us into deeper reflection and understanding of our motivations. This parable of greed and treasure, desire and possession, grief and division comes to us with a divine urgency: "This very night your life is being demanded of you."

Text

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Comment

This text begins with a sentence riddled with the building blocks of conflict: the problem, the persecutor, and the victim, each named in quick succession. Justice is subsequently demanded. It is striking that in its brevity we are given such depth of context. This unnamed person in the crowd, hurling a command at Jesus, just lost his father. In seeking a division of the inheritance, he also uncovers for us division within his family, a division amongst brothers. The grief of the loss is coupled with the pain of a difficult, possibly broken relationship. And so, this unnamed man comes to Jesus with a naked cry for justice.

The justice he seeks is interpersonal and external: "I have been wronged and I am the victim; he wronged me and he is the persecutor; here is a solution so give me justice." A Thomas-Killman analysis of conflict might put this man's conflict response in the competition mode. In this mode of conflict resolution we stand up for our rights and defend what we believe to be the correct course of action.

Especially in our pain of loss, grief, and division, we might see only our needs, only the wrongs done against us. We might be incapable of self-scrutiny, unable to acknowledge a different perspective, an alternative solution, or the possibility that we have fundamentally misunderstood the conflict. Our blinders are in place and we can only see the conflict through the narrative we've developed. Our gaze is set outward and we cannot see to the side, behind, or inward.

The resolution that the writer of this text offers is not one that involves a different mode of conflict resolution (accommodating, compromising, etc.). Rather, Jesus' words preserved for us in this Gospel invert the direction of the conflict: it is not interpersonal and external, a relationship amongst brothers, but deeply personal and internal, prompting an examination of our motivations. We are here invited not to look outward at the wrongs we perceive, but instead to look inward.

What draws us to a desire for justice? What motivates our anger and our understanding of a transgression?

Simply put, greed. The conflict arising between these brothers is rooted in greed, desire, wealth, possession, materialism.

Jesus further subverts expectations and refuses to take on the role of judge or arbiter, refusing to enact further division through the implementation of a law. The law, when pushed to its boundaries, becomes no longer sufficient. Were Jesus to provide the legal answer, the result would be both a division of property and the completion of a division of a relationship.

After stepping away from the role of judge, Jesus 'goes to the balcony.' In conflict negotiations, the parties in the conflict are encouraged to step back and think objectively, viewing the conflict from the metaphoric balcony. As often occurs in the parables of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' view from the balcony looks out, on a surface level, to another conflict entirely. In a deeper sense, however, his view from the balcony looks into the very heart of the conflict.

At the heart of this conflict is the parable of a wealthy man who becomes wealthier. He discusses with himself what he might do with his surplus, deciding to tear down his barns to build larger ones and store his extra crop, and concluding that this will allow his soul to be content and satiated. The life this man imagines is one of

solitude and wealth. He assumes eternal merriment and credits himself for his good fortune. He has made it. He has arrived. However, much like our unnamed man at the beginning of the scripture, this wealthy man lives his life with his blinders on.

Or, more concisely, he is a fool. "You fool!" says God. What a pronouncement. We cannot look away. You fool! This man, living for himself, intends to store up treasures and neglect family, community, and God.

I believe in a God who is living. A God who is present and relational. A God who can look out at us through the eyes of another. What would it mean if this wealthy man had stored his extra food, not in larger barns, but instead in the mouths of the hungry? What would it mean if the unnamed man sought strength, courage, grace, and love from Jesus in order to mend a divided relationship? This very night our lives are being demanded of us.

Response

Where in our lives are we demanding justice? What does a view from the balcony of the conflict look like?

In his conclusion to an analysis of this parable, Kenneth Bailey re-writes the story of the conflict, a portion excerpted here in the following prose-poem. May these words offer freedom from our desires that focus our attention on what we can receive rather than what we can give.

"A certain man had two sons.
One was rich and the other was poor.
The rich son had no children
while the poor son was blessed with many sons
and many daughters.

In time the father fell ill.
He was sure he would not live through the week
so on Saturday he called his sons to his side
and gave each of them half of the land as their inheritance.
Then he died.

Before sundown the sons buried their father with respect
as custom required.

That night the rich son could not sleep.
He said to himself,
"What my father did was *not just*.
I am rich, my brother is poor.
I have bread enough and to spare,
while my brother's children eat one day
and trust God for the next.
I must move the landmark which our father has set in the middle of the land
so that my brother will have the greater share.
Ah—but he must not see me.
If he sees me, he will be shamed.
I must arise early in the morning before it is dawn and move the landmark!"
With this he fell asleep
and his sleep was secure and peaceful.

Meanwhile, the poor brother could not sleep.
As he lay restless on his bed he said to himself,
“What my father did was *not just*.
Here I am surrounded by the joy of my many sons
and many daughters,
while my brother daily faces the shame
of having no sons to carry on his name
and no daughters to comfort him in his old age.
He should have the land of our fathers.
Perhaps this will in part compensate him
for his indescribable poverty.
Ah—but if I give it to him he will be shamed.
I must awake early in the morning before it is dawn
and move the landmark which our father has set!”

With this he went to sleep
and his sleep was secure and peaceful.

On the first day of the week—
very early in the morning,
a long time before it was day,
the two brothers met at the ancient land marker.
They fell with tears into each other’s arms.
And on that spot was built the city of Jerusalem.”

Prayer

God of unity,
God of all humanity,
Stir in us an awareness of the other.
Awaken our senses to the gift of community.
Guard our hearts against our greed.

Show us our foolish ways
So that we may instead flourish.

May we hear the urgency with which you call out to us.
May we answer in love.