

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

31.07.2022
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

This week's text hinges on two experiences of conflict that are instantly recognisable: that of a dispute in a family due to an inheritance; and the complication of ownership.

Conflict mediators in your city will know how much energy, pain, time— and money — is given to tensions that arise in families when inheritance is discussed in the wake of a death. Something much more than division happens. A sense of value, a sense of 'this is what they would want me to have', a sense of fairness, a sense of belonging, and a sense of validation through inheritance can all surface. All of these are right, and fair, and true, and complicated.

The wisdom of this week's gospel text is that it goes deeper than just the question of fair division of an inheritance, but asks the question of the soul: *what is your relationship to ownership?* In essence, this gospel concerns itself with the spirituality of possession; something that cuts close to the bone, in fact, it exposes marrow.

As you prepare for this text consider a time when ownership or possession mattered deeply to you. What was it about? What was the promise in this ownership/possession? What was the cost? Who benefitted from this? Who didn't? What else was occurring in this instance? memory? loyalty? emotion? old tensions? love?

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

Comment

A death in the family can be an apocalypse. Not in the sense of the end of the world — that’s not the meaning of apocalypse — but in the sense of an uncovering, a revealing of what is there. Old tensions can arise, and what has been hidden can be revealed. Death reveals life. And life can be a complicated thing.

This text starts off plainly:

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?”

This text is echoed in the gospel of Thomas, where a person says “*tell my brother to divide my father’s possessions with me*” and Jesus answers “*Oh man, who has made me a divider?*”

Why would a person appeal to Jesus for this role? The person in the crowd is telling Jesus to tell something to someone else. Even a basic understanding of the psychology of Jesus would suggest that he’s likely to resist such imperatives. Luke’s text puts it beautifully, where Jesus’ first response is “friend” — perhaps changing the space from being ordered to one of reciprocity — and then posing a question that is both philosophical and legal. Jesus did not have a formal role of either judge or arbitrator. This shows his knowledge of the system, but also the necessity of role in his imagination. Were he to take up an ad hoc role of judge or arbitrator, he’d be assumed to be on the side of the person who had recruited him. In some ways, what Jesus is resisting is a sense of ownership that this unnamed person in the crowd is exerting over him, coopting Jesus into siding with one side of a family dispute. He isn’t even being asked to be judge or arbitrator, he’s being asked to be partisan. Jesus’ quick fire reply demonstrates his intelligence, imagination and resistance to being the subject of someone else’s orders.

Jesus’ warning to “Take Care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed...” is worthwhile considering. The word translated ‘greed’ here is pleonexia () rendered elsewhere as avarice (Mk 7:22), covetousness (Romans 1:29) or extortion (2 Cor 9:5). Taking these multiple interpretations of pleonexia to heart, it seems clear that the gospel text isn’t only speaking to the question about how greed sits in this person who is on one side of a family dispute about an inheritance. Rather, the wisdom of this gospel text is also found in the fact that it speaks to the question of how the person in the crowd themselves is a victim of extortion. Who owns who when it comes to inheritance? What is gained when you win at the expense of others? If you are relentless in the pursuit of an inheritance — perhaps over and against the possibility of your siblings — what is at stake, what is won, what is lost, and what is the prize?

Such questions are at the heart of the short parable given by Jesus: the land owner whose high crop yield means he builds barns fit for provision for years to come. The voice of God, given by this parable, says “You fool! ... the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The man is not being critiqued for having an abundant harvest, but for having a relationship with possession that reveals an inner poverty. What might a wiser approach have been? That would be an interesting question for discussion in a group.

Of course all of this discussion about ownership and possession presupposes a certain moral neutrality in the question of ownership — whether of land, wealth, or item. Lucille Clifton’s short untitled poem that begins “being property once myself / i have a feeling for it” is an apocalypse too: if a tree wants to be a tree it should be a tree; if a person wishes to be a person, then too. The speaker of the poem takes on the mantle of “property” in an act of defiance that indicates the corrupt nature of ever considering another human being “property.” [You can read the full poem here.](#)

So much is gathered under the bowl of ownership. Under it is fear, validation and the desire to ward off death. Additionally there’s reward, ambition, desire, love, pain, justice and reparation. Where one person’s assertion of ownership might be the manifestation of centuries’ long pursuit of justice; another person’s assertion of ownership can be an amplification of unexamined entitlement. And between these two possibilities lie many others.

Reading this week’s short text, I don’t know that I’d propose the gospels are anti-possession. Rather I think the gospels make a case for examining one’s relationship to objects, property, ownership and inheritance. What is owning you as you stake a claim of ownership? How has it come to be? What else is happening in a relationship of possession? How — in the name of a just claim — might we be coopting others into being possessions, much like the person in the crowd did to Jesus? These are complicated questions, and ones that are at the heart of many conflicts that cause relationships — whether in family, congregation, community or club — to fracture.

Response

Consider some of the questions in this reflection — what are some of the dynamics of ownership within a dispute? what is the underbelly of possession? — and apply them to the everyday tensions about ownership/inheritance that are occurring within the parish of your own life. Some of these will be small, others will be significant.

Prayer

Jesus,
You resisted being owned
by anyone who would seek to
dictate your freedom.
Help us recognise our bids for control
so that our imaginations might move
in the direction of creativity
and integrity.
And as we do this, call us ‘Friends’
because true friendship
is a true treasure.
Amen.

Further Reading

You can find all of Lucille Clifton’s poems — many of them are short, because she wrote her poems in the context of a busy life — [in a gorgeous volume published by BOA Editions here.](#)

Elizabeth Alexander published a powerful and moving obituary of Lucille Clifton in

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey