

*A sermon for Sunday, July 26, 2020
offered for the Diocese of Massachusetts
by The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates*

Texts: Proper 12-A, Track 2:

1 Kings 3:5-12

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

The Treasure You Seek

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew [13:31-33,44-52] is a smorgasbord of mini-parables. Most of them relate to obtaining some treasure or some prized commodity: leavened bread, hidden wealth, fine pearls, a good haul of fish. And in most cases, the parable presents an increase of that treasure, some multiplication of the blessing, some leveraging of the treasure from smaller to greater: seed to tree, yeast to leavened bread, empty nets to full baskets.

Now, how does that growth happen? How does the metaphorical treasure get expanded? In last week's Gospel the disciples asked Jesus for a detailed explanation of his parable of the wheat and weeds. This time, after his dizzying recitation of five quick stories he asks them, "Have you understood all this?" And they say "Yes!" Frankly, I don't believe them, but consequently Jesus provides no interpretation.

So I'm going to go out on a limb here. By virtue of the connection Jesus makes between these images and "the kingdom of heaven" (or "the realm of God"), I'm going to say that in these tales of leavened richness the growth factor is Love. I think the treasure gets multiplied because – and to the extent that – it is destined for the common good. This, I think, is consistent with the whole Gospel witness. It is also consistent with some key moments in the Hebrew Scriptures.

For instance, let's have a look at the story of Solomon from First Kings [3:5-12] – one of the two options for this morning's First Lesson. In this story God comes to the young Solomon like the ultimate divine genie, offering to grant a wish. *"The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.'" So what is Solomon's wish? Solomon says, "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, [and the ability] to discern between good and evil."*

For Solomon, *desire* and *need* are one and the same. He's about to take the throne. He is thoroughly daunted by the magnitude of the task before him – to be king over God's chosen people, "so numerous they cannot be numbered." That which he desires is that which he needs to rule a great nation – wisdom. The wish he makes is not selfish. The treasure he

seeks is for the common good. And God is pleased by Solomon's request: *"Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word."*

Later in life Solomon's desire to rule an empire would become grandiose. As 'more became better' his politically expedient marriages would lead him towards a people not his own, and the worship of gods not his own. Eventually his construction of ostentatious splendor would require the use of forced labor, replicating the very slavery from which his own people had famously been delivered. But the Solomon in today's reading is noble. God gives Solomon the blessing he asks for precisely because it's a form of treasure to be shared with his people, for the common good.

Solomon's request shows that the seeds of wisdom have already been planted within him. Still, the seeds of his later excess must also have already been planted within him. It is for Solomon to choose between them. It is for me and for you, likewise, to choose – between unbridled self-interest and the well-being of the whole.

Here we are in the midst of this coronavirus pandemic. It has often been said that crisis and disaster bring out the best in humankind. In many cases no doubt this is true. But we are seeing that this is not always the case.

The astonishing controversy over the wearing of face masks is emblematic. By some it is cast as an assertion of individual rights and freedoms. Reminiscent of the debate over mandatory seat belts, the argument is that I should not be forced to do something that someone else has decided would be for my own good. But that's not the issue here. Unlike seat belts, the point of the face mask is not that we should wear it to protect ourselves individually. The evidence is that it will help protect others. The greater good to which I am called is to do an inconvenient and uncomfortable thing because it for the good of my neighbor. We call that Love. And the multiplication of that benefit – like leaven in the lump - is for the good of all.

The pandemic, perhaps more than any moment most of us have experienced, sets before us the call for Solomon's wisdom, and the call to guard against fear-based individualism. We may feel personally discouraged by the perilous gridlock of national leadership, but we can re-commit ourselves to the health of institutions which push back against a culture of individual self-interest and entitlement. The church should be one of those. So too are cultural, civic, and voluntary associations of all sorts which bring people together for commitment to one another, or to a larger cause which advances the common good.

I've been re-reading Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book, *The Dignity of Difference*, a section of which pertains. Sacks argues for the importance of institutions and communities in which we develop what he calls "the grammar and syntax of reciprocity, where we help others and they help us without calculations of relative advantage...."ⁱ He quotes the economist Francis Fukuyama:

Law, contract, and economic rationality provide a necessary but not sufficient basis for both the stability and prosperity of postindustrial societies; they must as well be leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, duty toward community, and trust.ⁱⁱ "Leavened," says the economist, using the same image as Jesus; an economy leavened with reciprocity, moral obligation, and duty toward community.

These virtues go by different names, says Rabbi Sacks, but our culture and society depend upon them:

Sociologists speak about trust; economists about social capital; socio-biologists about reciprocal altruism; political theorists about civil society. What these various terms signify is that social life cannot be reduced to a series of market exchanges. We need [social] covenants as well as [economic] contracts; ... These things go to the heart of who we are. They are 'signals of transcendence.'ⁱⁱⁱ

All around us these days are reminders of the consequences of entrenched self-interest, racial inequities, the absence of reciprocity, shattered trust, and a diminished commitment to the common good. If the ethic of love calls us to wear a mask, the same ethic functions on the larger scale. Individually and collectively, those of us with continuing resources are needed more than ever to help support those who are most vulnerable and have the least. If we let our anxieties and fear cause us all to pull into our own isolated, self-protective cocoons, then collectively we will all be devastated.

I invite you to ask: What is the treasure I seek? If God appeared in a dream to say, "Ask what I should give you?" – for what would I ask? What is the treasure which with my life I am already pursuing? What are the goals towards which I strive? Are there yet ways that, like Solomon, I might manifest in my goals the sacrifice of self for the common good?

Small seeds of moral obligation grow into capacious trees. The leaven of reciprocity provides enough bread for others. The common effort of casting our nets together enables the heaviest of hauls. In our churches, in our diocese, in our communities, in our nation – may we strive for the common good, the one treasure that multiplies like Love!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London/NYC: Continuum, 2002), p. 151.

ⁱⁱ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995), p. 11; as cited in Sacks, p. 152.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sacks, p. 157.