

THE SPIRIT OF THE POOR

Sermon by Amanda Jones

Missions Sunday

Damascus United Methodist Church

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost – October 11, 2009

First of all, thank you for having me come all the way from Nicaragua to share with you all on this Missions Sunday. Eduardo, Memo, and I feel very honored to share with the entire congregation about the work we do and what we believe. And now, to the homily...

Suze Orman, a personal finances expert, does a segment on her show called “Can I Afford It?” The woman calling in wanted to send her children on a choir trip the following year to Europe. (The choir here isn’t going to Europe next year, right?) The trip was \$12,000, but she and her husband earned \$12,000 a month, had very little debt, and about \$500,000 in retirement savings. Suze denied her, because she said that if the woman did not put away that \$12,000 into their retirement savings, they wouldn’t be able to afford the type of lifestyle in retirement that they were accustomed to. I was floored thinking about just what kind of lifestyle it is that we all let ourselves get used to.

So, when we look at this Gospel passage taken from Mark, we tend to think: “Wow, Jesus, um, that’s a tough one.” Sell *everything* I have and give it all to the poor? It makes us uncomfortable, right? There are feelings of guilt there, which go in contrast to the ideal common in the United States that if we work hard, we can spend our hard earned money however we choose.

Let’s imagine you follow Jesus’ words to the tee though. You have given everything you own to a peasant farmer in La Danta and they are now the ones living in the States, booking online cruises and calling in to Suze Orman for retirement advice. And you, living in a dirt-floor house without running water in La Danta, while you feel good in the beginning, soon you begin to feel some resentment, right? And the same amount of the earth’s resources is getting wasted. Looking at it logically, simply redistributing the wealth will a) probably never happen and b) not solve the world’s problems. So our goal should be to make everyone rich, right? Wrong. Right now, the Global Footprint Network tells us

that humankind is using 140% of the world's resources that can be generated in a year, or 40% more than we actually have that can be reproduced. And, the United Nations Development Programme's report from 2007-2008 says that if all of humanity adopts a lifestyle like the U.S. or Europe, we would need nine planets to support all the resources that would be consumed annually.

So what the heck does Jesus really want us to do? Archbishop Oscar Romero, who worked with the poor of El Salvador for human rights and was eventually assassinated for his work, mentions two virtues that go along with this passage and are vitally missing from the wealthy world today: the spirit of the poor and loving charity. It's a phrase that always struck me as ironic from the Beatitudes, that the poor in spirit will receive the Kingdom of Heaven. But then, I heard the translation in Spanish—not those who are poor in spirit, but those who have the Spirit of the Poor will receive God's Kingdom in Heaven. And, after being in Nicaragua and seeing the poverty and pure happiness that is mixed up in simplicity, I began to understand the Spirit of the Poor as something empowering, something that we should strive for.

So what, exactly, is the Spirit of the Poor? For a peasant farmer in rural Nicaragua, it is many things, residing in the core of their soul. It's a deep trust in God that the rains will come, providing alimentation for the crops that will feed their family, because that's how it's been done for years and generations, and even if it's not a lot of food, or you can't buy a lot of extras, you are grateful for what you do have. It's not worrying that you don't have a college degree or a PhD because the most important thing anyone can learn is that our Creator loves us and sent His only Son to us in the form of a poor person without an Ivy League degree to teach about the Kingdom of Heaven. It's the understanding that death is a natural part of the cycle of life, and that riches were never meant to be stored here, anyway. It's also about knowing for a fact that a family actually can live off two dollars a day and that the accumulation of money only offers a false sense of security. It's not about trying to get ahead, but living in community and helping one's neighbor. And finally, it's realizing that there is happiness in the less complicated, the less worldly, and that in order to be happy we need to depend a lot more on God and a lot less on ourselves.

Having our financial security blanket ripped off of us initially causes a lot of angst though, right? Poor Job, who has never been poor in his life, struggles to comprehend why God is testing him in this way. The important thing, though, is that he never stops talking to God, even in his anger and questioning. Job 23:17

says, “Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.” The same can be said for Psalm 22, which begins by crying out, as Jesus does on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In both occasions, the person seeking God is desperate, but is not without the eternal hope that God is listening to him. That persistence, that trust in God, that comes from less than ideal situations, such as poverty, grief, or pain, but proves one’s character, is what God is truly enlisting of his followers.

So, it appears we can learn a lot from those whom we label “poor,” right? That, in essence is what *Entre Culturas*, or *Between Cultures*, is aiming for. Our goal isn’t to help put in the next strip mall in La Danta or create the Beverly Hills of Nicaragua, but perhaps be the bridge for Damascus to offer some companionship, empathy, and loving charity to La Danta and in return receive their love and celebrate this unique glimpse into the wisdom that the poor can offer. It’s a chance for the people of La Danta to teach as well, to show us how we can leave our camel laden with things we think we can’t live without at the eye of the needle and cross over with a light and happy heart.