

"The Power of Half"

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"The purpose of life is ... above all, to matter, to count, to stand for something, to have it make some difference that we lived at all." ~ Leo Rosten

SCRIPTURE and READINGS

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "You know the commandments: *You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.*

The man said, "Teacher, I have kept all these commandments since my youth."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions.

~The Gospel of Mark, Chapter 10, 17-22, New Revised Standard Bible

Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus by R. Funk, R. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar*

Nobody made a greater mistake than the person who did nothing because they could only do a little. We all have gifts the world can use. *~ Edmund Burke*

SERMON - New members' Sundays always give me a heightened awareness of the significance and the diversity of our individual spiritual journeys. Our stories of those journeys affirm that most of us came here in different ways from somewhere else: some of us on meandering paths of faith, some on clear roads. All of us have both accumulated and discarded a variety of religious baggage as we journeyed. My own journey includes a Presbyterian baptism, a Methodist church school, a Lutheran confirmation and youth groups, a predominantly Jewish high school, a Lutheran college, membership in several United Church of Christ congregations, a number of inter-faith experiences, and more than three decades at UCG.

Along the way, I have grappled with and reconstructed what I believe about Jesus. I've abandoned some things and I've affirmed many things about this holy man whose life and whose message is central to my faith formation. I'm pretty comfortable with what I no longer believe about Christianity and equally comfortable with what inspires me to identify myself as a Christian.

Yet, from time to time, I am called up short by that reminder to beware of finding a Jesus who is entirely congenial to you. Today's scripture passage is one of those times that stops me in my tracks. It is often easy for me to set aside Bible passages like this that make me uncomfortable. At the same time, I know that a passage like this pushes me to explore more fully what I believe and sometimes holds me to account for the places where I may be blind or unwilling to look deeper.

I remember today's scripture passage well from my Lutheran days, and it has always made me squirm. If we continue reading the passage, in the next paragraph Jesus says "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven." Some interpreters have sought to reduce the incongruity of this image of a camel by suggesting that the "eye of the needle" was actually a narrow gate in the city of Jerusalem through which a camel could pass only if the baggage it was carrying was removed. Now that is a great metaphor, but, alas, there is no evidence of such a gate existing in Jerusalem.

Most Biblical scholars find this saying about camel and the eye of the needle to be entirely consistent with Jesus' concern for the marginalized and the poor, as he expressed it in the first of the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." In fact, 75% of the Jesus Seminar members used this image of the camel and the eye of the needle as a point of reference for determining the authentic sayings of Jesus, citing its humor, its hyperbole, its memorable imagery, and the strength of the analogy for what it would be like for a wealthy person to enter God's domain. Perhaps we might share this passage with Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta, who has been in the news lately as one who believes that Jesus preached a gospel of prosperity.

This passage is troubling, and sometimes haunting, for me because I can't distance myself from it. I'm clearly not one of the poor. I am, like the rich young man, a person who takes her commitments to her faith seriously; I am honest and faithful; I don't murder or steal; I honor my parents. Yet Jesus clearly says that is not enough. "Go; sell what you have and give the money to the poor." I, like the rich young man, go away grieving, because I know that I'm not going to do that. And admitting to myself that I'm not going to do that means I can't squirm out of recognizing the importance I place upon and the attachment I have to my possessions. I can work up all kinds of righteous indignation at Jesus about how unrealistic, uncaring, even misguided his comments are - because after all, if everyone did that, would we really be better off? - but in my heart of hearts, my soul of souls, I understand the point Jesus is making and it takes me to task. Being a person of serious faith, living a moral and spiritual life, all that is good and important. But to change the world, to create a heaven on earth, requires more. It requires those of us who have so much to give much away, not just to make life better for the poor, but also to live our own lives more humbly, more meaningfully, more lovingly, to live our own lives as part of the kingdom of God.

I read *The Power of Half* this summer, a book by Kevin Salwen and Hannah Salwen, and it touched me. Kevin and his wife Joan and their two children, Hannah (14 years old) and Joseph (12 years old) and their dog Maggie, lived in Atlanta in their three floor, 6,500 square foot landmark home on Peachtree Circle. Their life had become a cycle where better and nicer was the new normal as Joan and Kevin were largely consumed by their careers and enhancing their lifestyle. Now they weren't people without conscience. They regularly volunteered to build Habitat houses and feed the homeless, but they were largely focused on themselves. Over time, their sense of togetherness as a family began to erode. And Kevin says, "We were missing the crucial

question: what did our family stand for? What did we want to be – not to have or do, but to be?”

One day in the car, at a stoplight in downtown Atlanta, Hannah and Kevin encountered a homeless man on the sidewalk with a sign asking for food. Another man in a black Mercedes drove up and stopped next to their car at the light. Hannah looked back and forth saying, “Dad, if that man (pointing to the Mercedes) had a less nice car, then that man (homeless guy) could have a meal.” Kevin paused a moment and then answered, “Yeah, But you know, if we had a less nice car, he could have a meal.”

A few weeks later, at dinner one night, Hannah said, “I don’t want to be a family that just sits around and says I wish we could do something to help people who are poor. I want to get out there and really make a difference, even if it’s a small difference.” That set their family on a journey of self-discovery and commitment that not only changed one small part of the world, but changed them as well. They decided to sell their large home, move to a house half as big, and donate half of the proceeds from the sale of their large house to help alleviate poverty in one needy location in the world.

The book is their story of what they learned and especially what they received by making this commitment. The biggest change was in the dynamics of their family. Their conversations became more open, more focused, more honest with one another as they worked as a team on their project. Each person had a vote and they all had to agree before they took any action. First they all agreed to sell their home; then they all agreed on where to move; then they had to do an enormous sorting of their things, keeping only what was important and what could fit in a house half the size; and then they had to reach consensus about what to do with the money they were going to give away. And, as soon as they put their house on the market, the economy tanked, houses stopped selling, and Kevin’s company closed its business. But they went ahead with their plan.

The Salwens eventually chose to give half the money from the sale of their house to the Hunger Project in Africa, an organization that places control in the African people and their leaders in order to move their village from poverty to self-reliance. Villagers go through a five-year empowerment process and create a management board made up of villagers themselves, with a requirement that 50% of the board must be women. The villagers themselves build an epicenter, a structure that becomes the center for communal life: food storage areas, a meeting room, a nurse’s quarters, a bank, and school rooms. Finally, the management board, by showing what the village has accomplished, petitions the local officials for access to electricity.

The Salwens initially envisioned themselves as being directly involved: working side by side with villagers, digging wells and painting walls. When they actually went to Ghana to visit the villages they were supporting, the Hunger Project director set the parameters very differently. “Don’t bring any gifts. Don’t give or promise more money. Let the villagers show you their accomplishments and support them. That’s all.”

There are three responses to suffering, three ways we can give to help create a piece of the new earth. First, we can directly give money and food and goods to those who need them (such as our UCG Food 4 Kids or Christmas angels programs). Second,

we can work with and support organizations that care for the poor (such as UCG's involvement with Gainesville Community Ministries, Oxfam, Rebuild Gainesville, the Interfaith Hospitality Network or Habitat). Third, we can work to change and transform the structures of our society so that folks can feed themselves, have access to education, and find jobs (such as the Gainesville Action Network.) All are valid; all are important. And, in each scenario, we need to know what our role is, what the parameters are, what the realities and possibilities of outcomes may be.

So what do I take away from this family's experience? Like my reaction to the story of Jesus asking the rich man to sell all he had and give it to the poor, I began reading this book with my own disclaimer, "I could never sell my house and give half that money away." Kevin Salwen says clearly, "Who expects you to do that? Your power of half can be whatever you choose." They chose to sell their house because they could afford to do so, because it was what their family could handle from the perspective of giving half. And they gave away half of **one** piece of their collective life. They did not give up the rest: they still took vacations and owned cars and enjoyed life – and, after all, the house they moved into still had 3,000 square feet.

The more of the book I read, the more I was excited by the power of half to create change both for the world and for me personally. Whether it's a decision to give money or time or both, giving half of one thing I have is a standard that is measurable. It's very different than thinking or saying, "I wish I could do more." What if I chose to use half the money I spend on coffee or half of my tax refund or half of one of my assets in my will – or what if I chose to take half of the time I spend watching DVDs each month – or what if I chose to cut my use of electricity or water or plastic in half – and then committed **that** half of the money or time or energy I saved to be used for the benefit of others or the environment? By choosing just one place in my life to use the power of half, I could make additional contributions of service and assistance and justice toward the new earth I dream of.

Two things are important to remember. The first is that virtually no one can achieve Jesus' call to sell everything and give to the poor. It's like those other challenges Jesus sets out before us: to always go the second mile, to cut off your arm if it offends you. These are difficult, if not impossible, ideals.

Second, just because an ideal seems impossible does not make it irrelevant. It is important because it points us in directions we overlook or avoid. It challenges us to see beyond our comfortable excuses. It pushes us to go another step along the path. As Edmund Burke said, "Nobody made a greater mistake than the person who did nothing because they could only do a little." None of us can use the excuse that because we can't give everything, we need not give anything.

Jesus calls us and challenges us in ways that we can never completely fulfill. We all fall short. Therefore we must remain humble, knowing that we need God's grace and guidance to sustain us and that we need support from one another. I believe that there is a depth of spirit, a piece of heaven on earth that we discover as we give to others from our own abundance. It's the way I want to live and be challenged. It's also the way the kin-dom of heaven comes to earth and to me and to you. Amen.