

Whose Resources?

On Earth as in Heaven: God's Call for Justice – Part 1

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Amos 6: 1, 4-7; Luke 16:19-29

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, on cable TV The Movie Channel, the 1930's Frank Capra movie, *You Can't Take It With You* was on with John Barrymore in the lead role as Martin Vander Hoff, a man who doesn't care about wealth and makes fun of people who do.

The story is a typical Capra movie, with a hero who goes up against the rich and powerful. In this story, two families find themselves encountering each other when the daughter of one becomes engaged to the son of the other. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, this is a comedy intended to show the poverty of wealth. In typical fashion for a Capra flick, the rich and powerful one has to learn a hard lesson.

The title of the movie is taken from this speech from the hero, Martin Vander Hoff, to the villain, Mr. Kirby

“Maybe it'll stop you trying to be so desperate about making more money than you can ever use? You can't take it with you, Mr. Kirby. So what good is it? As near as I can see, the only thing you can take with you is the love of your friends.”

As I examined our story from Luke today, these words kept ringing in my ears.

Gospel of Luke]

For our gospel story tells a darker tale – one consistent with the themes of wealthy men trying to figure out how to live according to God's covenant in this gospel. Luke's Jesus tells us a parable about a man with 100 sheep, a traveler who can afford to pay a wayside inn to care for someone injured on the road, how a rich man can be commended for selling off half of what he owns and give the proceeds to the poor, and how the rich should invite the poor to wedding feasts. Luke is comfortable with making the rich *uncomfortable*.

In this story of income inequality, the wealthy man, who really does live a very 0.1 percent kind of life, finds himself off in Hades (hell) after he dies, and sees across a great chasm, the beggar Lazarus, who he ignored in real life, at the bosom of Father Abraham.

When he is reminded that the result of Lazarus receiving the benefits and he the agony of flames comes in the teachings of Moses and the prophets, what parts of the Bible is he referring to?

Amos – a prophet who knows the laws of God

Among the prophets that Jesus refers to is surely our prophet Amos, who was a shepherd by trade, and one of those who spoke to power and wealth – seeing that the elite’s love of luxury in Israel would weaken the fabric of the country, and God’s judgment would be exile for those who did not follow the teachings of Moses.

In Amos’ day, the teachings of Moses were the covenant with God – a way of living that ensured all participated in the economy of Yahweh. Scholars think that chapters 21, 22, and 23 in Exodus are the heart of the covenant – and what are the topics covered? Important ways of living – how people who are even slaves are to be treated, how violence is to be punished, laws of property that limit punishments to what was reasonable, and how those who steal must pay restitution. Chapter 23 in particular focuses on justice for all, holding the largest contempt for those who would pervert the courts of justice. Finally, the community is forbidden to oppress resident aliens, reminding the Hebrews that they, too, had been aliens in the land of Egypt.

When Jesus invokes the teachings of Moses and the prophets, he cuts to the heart of what it means to live peaceably and in community with love for all. It was a community of values based on what was at hand.

This egalitarian system has fallen into disuse and abuse by the time of Jesus, as we see in the gospel text today. The system of the Temple has become one of patronage to the Roman empire, and an elite disconnected from the everyday people that Jesus ministered to.

Jesus came to critique and correct the Jewish approach to serving all who had faith, and to create a community with strong enough bonds so that those who had too much would be willing to share with those who didn’t have enough. That is, they shared a vision together of what they could become as a new kind of community, of what had happened to their lives because of Jesus, and it transformed them.

It was so fulfilling to be a part of this community that they didn’t need their possessions to feel important or that their lives had significance, just as Martin Vander Hoff advises in the movie. They shared what they had because it mattered how they lived together, and something inside them had a new quality of life.

This is our inheritance, knowing that the resources are not ours.

Let me tell you a story -

There was this woman Annie, and she needed a transformation. She was an alcoholic just a few months away from dying of the disease when she wandered into an Episcopal priest's office and he listened to her. He listened hard and he appreciated her for who she was. It gave her some courage and so she wandered into a beat-up little church and sat on the back row while spirituals were sung. At first, she left before the sermon. Bit-by-bit she began to hang on until she stayed for the sermon, and she let this Jesus-dude into her life and bit-by-bit things got a whole bunch better.

Without the community sharing what they had with Annie, she wouldn't have made it, the way that she tells the story. And when she got pregnant and wasn't going to marry the father, well, she wouldn't have made it through that either, except that the community would share with her, old ladies living on social security who'd put dollars and change into her pockets to help her get through the month, sharing with the little that they had.

The woman, Ann Lamott, had found a church that lived their truth – sharing out of what they had.

Our Opportunity

Fortunately, we have the opportunity and blessings to share what we have in the spirit of Moses, and the prophets, and Jesus. I believe that churches that live according to these teachings can bless a world deep in need, especially now, in a time of pandemic and social unrest. It can be tough work, messy work, because all of us have messiness in our lives. But it is really the gospel at work in the lives of those we know.

If we really believe in the God to whom we belong,
then we will be willing share what we have so that all have enough.

If we have a center in God that says it will all be all right no matter how much we have in life, then we will be willing to share what we have.

Friends, it is true that you can't take it with you – but we can share what we have and love God and our neighbors.

Amen.