

Thinking For the First Time

Fr. Vince Donovan was a missionary priest to the Masai people, a nomadic, cattle herding people who live across the east African country of Tanzania. Rather than go in and build schools and churches, Fr. Vince adopted St. Paul's method of mission. By himself, he went to where the people lived, to a people never exposed to Christianity in any meaningful way, and began to ask them who God was to them and to share with them his understanding of the Christian God.

The Masai believed in one God. But they saw this God as their God, a tribal God. A god who loved the Masai; but not outsiders. A God who supported the Masai in their cattle raids on neighboring clans and tribes, and who cursed all who were not Masai. Fr. Vince shared with them the idea of the Christian God. The one true God who made all that is; the one true God who loves all people. Even the other clans. Even the other tribes.

The Masai struggled with this idea. After several such discussions, Fr. Vince saw something:

“One morning, while the old man, Ndangoya (the tribal leader) and his community were struggling with this program, I could not help but notice a colleague of his, a man named Keriko, in obvious pain. I was certain he was ill. But my Masai catechist helper, Paul, chuckled at my concern.

‘Are you worried about old man Keriko? Don't worry, he is all right. You see, for a Masai, there is not much need to think in life. Almost everything he learns, he learns by memory, by rote. It becomes automatic for him, like tying your shoes or buttoning your shirt is for you. He learns about food and clothes and houses and cattle and grasses and women by memory – even things about God and religion. When he needs an answer to a question, all he has to do is reach into his memory and come up with the correct answer. He can reach his adulthood without thinking at all. What you are asking Keriko to do is to take the first thought about the Masai (as God's favored) and the second thought about the human race and the God of all the tribes, and to put the two thoughts together and make a new thought. That is very difficult work! *What you are witnessing in Keriko is the pain on the face of a man who is thinking for the first time in his life.*'

Paul chuckled again. He had a unique sense of humor.”

Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered, (Orbis 2003) 39-40.

I tell you this story because today we hear the parable of the rich fool. It's a story that begins when a man in the crowd yells to Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute.

The parable of the rich fool, for we who have been born and raised in this land of incredible wealth, is a tough one. We baby boomers, and our children who follow,

became consumers almost before we could walk or talk. My cousin's first words were not "mama" or "papa" but "co-ca co-la!"

So for us, hearing this parable, if we really come face to face with the truth of this parable, we will likely join old Keriko in holding our aching heads too. Like Keriko, I wonder if we accept all we know as second nature, whether our immersion in a consuming society is so complete, so all encompassing, from the day we come out of the womb, that to think this thought of wealth as what we strive for; and to think this new thought of God warning us of the danger in that striving,.....well, how does your head feel?

Here in Hawaii, unlike much of the rest of the country, we still have, thanks to our Hawaiian and Asian traditions, strong family and community ties. Yet this great gift of community is under assault by the broader culture that champions the strong individual, beholden to no one.

In part, it is the loss of community that Jesus highlights in this parable of the rich fool. The man speaks to no one but himself. Plans with no one but himself. Seeks to benefit no one but himself. He is the ideal western man: independent, self-reliant, self-made, needing no one.

Except, this is not how God intended us to be.

And in the end, to quote Professor Bailey, "God thunders, look what you have done to yourself! You plan alone, build alone, indulge alone, and now you will die alone!"
Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, (Eerdmans 1980), 67.

Some commentators, and many preachers, do their best to defang this parable. They say: "The problem isn't wealth, the problem is how we use it." That sounds good, but it isn't faithful to what Jesus is saying. St. Paul understood Jesus perhaps better than any other human being. And this is what St. Paul says about work (which, for most of us, is where our wealth comes from). He said there are two reasons why we work:

First, so we are not a burden on others. Second, so we may be able to give to those in need.

How different from our culture, which teaches us to work so we may accumulate wealth, and then, with enough of it, retire to the good life, where we may eat, drink and be merry! Who among us has not daydreamed about hitting the winning lottery bonanza, or picking that certain stock just before it explodes in value, or otherwise making it big so there is nothing left to do but sit back and relax?

The musings of the foolish rich man are the musings of our culture. No wonder wrapping our heads around what Jesus is saying brings not comfort but a raging headache.

But, take a step back for a moment. Take a step back.

None of this should be heard as a scold or as judgment. Rather, look at what Jesus does in today's gospel. He tells the young man who wants "justice" from his brother that when self-centered justice seeking erupts, there is only division. Jesus rejects the young man's desire, which will gain him wealth at the cost of a permanent breach with his brother.

The story that follows is a reminder that all that we have is gift. Our lives are on loan to us, as are whatever material blessings may come our way. That is the cold water Jesus threw on that young man, water intended to wake him up. It is the water that will make any western head ache because the notion, in our Monday to Saturday lives, that we work only so we don't burden others and to have resources to help the needy sounds as foreign to me as the notion of God loving everyone sounded to that old Masai elder, Keriko.

One theologian put it this way: "I know of no more difficult topic to apply personally or to the lives of modern western Christians" than the topic of the rich fool.

Snodgrass, Stories of Intent, (Erdmans 2008) 400.

He is right.

But like much of our faith, that which seems at first to be only bad news, is in fact, the very best of news. How often do we think of Christianity as a set of rules to follow, whose sole goal is a disembodied life in "heaven"? That take on our faith is not only boring, it is not the faith that God, through Jesus, calls us to. Instead, the faith we are called to looks more like this:

Imagine you are standing on the rooftop of a very tall building. There is a wire secured and pulled tight. You are standing at the very edge. God beckons us, off of the roof, and onto the wire, to walk away from the security we think we have made for ourselves, and into the only security that is true, which is God.

The world is an abundant place. The Creator knows our needs. And she beckons us today to unclench our hands, to let loose our wallets, to give up control, and in the letting go, to learn how to live.

Jesus says elsewhere, don't fear those who can kill you, fear him who can throw you into hell. Yet the good news of Jesus is that the only one we truly should fear is not to be feared at all, because he who made us loves us, and loves us enough so that it is safe; safe to unclench, safe to exhale, safe to live one day at a time, safe to give, safe to open our eyes to all that we have, and accept it all as a gift, a loan, freely given so that we may, in turn, freely give.

May God bless you, and give you peace,

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