

August 1, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Change My Brother!

Colossians 3:1-11

...you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self...

Luke 12:13-21

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

As Jesus is teaching, someone in the crowd calls out, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." He wants Jesus to correct a personal injustice he has suffered. He thinks that if Jesus changes his brother, and he gets his share of the loot, he will be happy. He locates the cause of his suffering outside of himself.

Jesus doesn't bite the hook. "Who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" If Jesus really cared about people, would he not jump at the chance to make things right between people? Most of us would! We love to get in there and decide who is wrong, who is right, and think we are fixing things. Jesus teaches us to see more deeply than that. He sees in this man something common to us all, so he now speaks to the whole crowd: "Watch out for all kinds of greed. Your life isn't made up of all the stuff you have." Then Jesus tells a parable. A parable is more effective than a moral lecture. It sticks with you, lodges itself in your soul, and keeps stirring up self-awareness and self-understanding. A parable is designed to look at our lives more deeply and clearly, and that is the doorway to new life.

A farmer has such a good year that his barns are bulging. So he builds bigger barns. All the time, he hums a little tune to himself: "Soul, now you've got it made! You take it easy. You are fixed for life." Suddenly reality crashes in. God tells him: "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you." The man's death is no longer somewhere down the road; it is near. And that puts everything in perspective. What does it matter that his barns are bulging with grain? In terms of the meaning and quality of life, nothing. What ultimately matters, says Jesus, is whether or not we are rich toward God, whether or not we are living a truly meaningful life. True security and wealth are found in awareness of our relationship with God and living our lives out of that spiritual center.

What Jesus saw in the man was greed. The problem was not his brother. If Jesus had stepped in and made his brother split the inheritance, nothing would have changed. The man would still be stuck in his own spiritual poverty. Beware of all kinds of greed, says Jesus to all the people. It is not only about material possessions. It is a spiritual orientation toward life. The man wanted his brother to change. He thought that would make him happy. Then his suffering would end. Greed is believing that we will be happy when other people and life around us are changed to suit us. It is attaching our happiness to getting more and more of whatever it is we have come to think as essential--money, possessions, attention, approval, achievements, success. We can even be greedy for love, so that we are always demanding that others love us. We can be spiritually greedy, always hungry for more and more "experiences" that keep us inspired or feeling uplifted.

Most of us have shared this man's plea now and then: Change my brother or sister! Change this other person who is so irritating or troublesome! Change this lousy world so it is the way I think it should be! Then I will be happy. Then I will not suffer. In many ways we attach our happiness to external things and conditions. In the meantime, we are perpetually dissatisfied and miserable. Jesus turns it around: I will not change your brother to suit you, but I can help you change in relationship to your brother and to life itself. This man's response to his brother reveals something important about himself, something that is causing him real spiritual pain and keeping him from true life. That is why Jesus tells his parable about the rich farmer. What is most crucial for our lives is not the kind of

security that comes from material or any other kind of possessions. It is the kind of security that comes from living as closely to God as we can. It is the freedom from anxiety and fear that is rooted in our love and trust of God. It is the joy that arises when we are liberated from self-concern, from all those attachments that, far from bringing happiness, keep us anxious and dissatisfied.

Our responses to others reveal more about ourselves than the other person. What we condemn or complain about in others is often in us, and that is what pushes our buttons. The greatest spiritual teachers, including Jesus, have understood and taught that in order to overcome violence, greed, hate, and injustice in the world, we must recognize and overcome those things in ourselves. That is why the inward journey of prayer, reflection, self-examination, and personal transformation, is central to the life of faith. There needs to be a consistency between what we value and work for in the world, and who we are as persons. If we are liberating ourselves from our attachments to things we think will bring us happiness, then we are becoming people through whom God's spirit can do its work to bring about God's kingdom.

I remembered something this week that illustrates all of this in my own life. In the spring of my senior year at Lynchburg College, I was granted status as a conscientious objector on the basis of my religious beliefs and practice. This was a lofty, yet scary, moment for me, to put my faith into practice with regard to war. However, as time drew near for Kaye and me to move to Boston, where I would perform my alternative service, my less lofty self was raising its ugly head. Before me lay two years of work as an orderly in a hospital. Meanwhile, my friends were going on to seminary and graduate school. By the time I finished and maybe entered graduate school myself, they would almost be finished! Jealousy, resentment, competitiveness, whatever it was, revealed that I was attached to something that was causing me suffering. As I worked to admit these feelings, understand them, and let them go, I was then able to enter fully into my work at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. I began to experience a liberation FROM those attachments and FOR the full experiencing of my work with the children who came into the cardiac medical and surgical division of the hospital. By the time I finished my two years, I was deeply grateful for all that I had experienced and learned, all of the growth that had occurred in me because I embraced the life I had chosen. I felt as though I had lost nothing at all, and had gained a great deal, a richness toward God, as Jesus would say.

Paul wrote to the Colossian community that we have died with Christ and we have been raised with Christ to a new life. The old self that keeps creating its own unhappiness is dead, gone. The new self, our true self, that is growing richer toward God has been born in us. Yet we need to keep working with this old life and this new life. The old self, smaller self keeps cropping back up. Just when we think we are so loving, forgiving, non-violent, so full of God's purposes, someone or something comes along and trips us up. The anger, the fear, the jealousy, the judgmentalism flare up in us again. And once more we find ourselves thinking it is this other person or this circumstance that needs to be changed. If we can receive persons and experiences into our spiritual lives and discover what they are teaching us about ourselves, we will find that the real answer is not in the change that happens around us but within us. When we are engaged in that kind of transformative spiritual life, when true, deep love, when true peacefulness, when true forgiveness and compassion are being formed in us, then we are people who foster change in others and the world.

We don't know what happened to the person in the crowd that day, what he did with Jesus' teaching. He was at an important juncture in his life. He could remain the prisoner of expectations and demands related to his brother and to life around him. Or he could look at himself, come to greater self-awareness, and turn toward a life of true security, freedom, and joy. When we make that turning in our own lives, when we work with the continuing birth of this new self within us, then we discover, I think, what Paul is talking about when he says, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all." This is the new humanity, our true humanity.