

Stewardship Sermon
By Avi Lev
November 15, 2009

*The Fish in the Sea is not Thirsty --
Practicing Generosity*

*Fish do not carry around the sacred liquid in little cups,
they swim freely in the huge fluid blessing.*

With these few words, the 15th century Sufi poet Jalaludin Rumi describes what it is like to be constantly connected with God. Not just in church on Sunday mornings, but everywhere and all the time. These fortunate people who practice their faith continually, live fearlessly, surrounded by love, swimming in the very stuff of God. *The fish in the sea is not thirsty.*

But most of us, most of the time, dwell more in fear than in grace. Rumi says of this separation from God, that we are like a reed of bamboo that has been cut from the river bed. *Listen, says Rumi, listen to the story told by the reed flute, the story of being separated. "Ever since I was cut from the reed bed, I have made this crying sound. Anyone apart from someone he loves, understands this. Anyone who has been pulled away from the Source, longs to return."*

We all know this separation. And we all know also, the still, small voice of this Grief. Many of us know, too, a louder, whiney voice. It is an inner that barks at me in the tight-wad language of fear. It is my old friend, Fear. He repeats to me over and over, the *lie* that simplicity and generosity will not solve the complex problems of my world, the *lie* that kindness will not advance my career; the *lie* that material welfare is the main goal of my existence. How do I speak peace to this tight wad within?

The grace of God can manifest anywhere, from anyone. When I was a about sixteen years old, growing up in Los Angeles, every week or two my baseball-fan friends and I would pay a dollar each to sit in the top deck bleachers of Dodger Stadium, in hopes of watching Steve Garvey whack one out of the park. There was a young man there who would walk up and down the aisle, selling souvenirs and hot dogs. Instead of saying "get your hot dogs here," he would yell out, "C'mon you tight wads -- break loose!" Break loose.

There is a path Home, although it is not a path for the lazy or the fainthearted. It is the path of practice. It is the path of choosing grace over fear. It is the path of breaking loose. We find our way to God, by practicing, courageously and diligently, everyday, those ways of being, those ways of doing, that put into force those sacred values that are taught by every religion of the world.

For us Christians, we find our way Home, by the *imitation of Christ*, by breaking loose from selfishness, breaking loose from greed, breaking loose from fear, and by embracing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Not just as a *good idea*, but as a *daily practice*, in the world, with real people. Just as Christ taught; just as Christ did.

Now, there are many variations on the theme of spiritual practice, and many paths that lead to God. But there is *one* practice that excels, one that informs and surpasses all the others. The most transforming of transforming methods, the fastest pilgrim's path to redemption, the practice that Christ Himself most vehemently advocated when he was personally present here on Earth. This is the practice of *generosity*. If you wish to be a person of God; if you wish to have insight; if you wish to abide in true peace of mind, if you wish to come Home, then there is one thing that you absolutely must do: *you must give things away*. Make room in your house, make room in your heart, clear out the clutter of selfishness, quiet the voice of fear. Break loose! Let go the tight-wad that is constricting your spirit, and Make a place for God to come in.

A story from Rumi: *The river is deep. A thirsty man climbs a walnut tree next to the water, and drops the walnuts in one by one. He listens carefully as they hit, and watches the bubbles. A more rational man gives him advice: "You are wasting your time! You are so far from the water, that by the time you get down to gather the walnuts, the river will have carried them away!" The Thirsty Man replies: "Ah, but I am not after the Walnuts. I want the music that they make when they splash."*

My own mind is not always listening for this splash. Instead, it is more often filled with the yada-yada Mickey-mouse hubbub chatter of my own inner voice, which is usually solving problems. It asks things like How can I get my granddaughter to calm down? How can I deal with this self-important client? Where can I get good Thai food for lunch? All of its questions are really forms of the same question, which is: "Where can I hide from my longtime companion, Fear?" If your mind also has chatter like this, you may find that the daily practice of generosity may have a calming effect. New questions start to arise: "this extra \$5 in my pocket, should I give to that homeless person, or should I send it to a charity in Haiti?" "What can I do to be of powerful service, right now, right here?" It doesn't matter how we answer these questions; what matters is that the habit of our thinking starts to shift. Generosity invokes, by practice, the habit of divine economy -- of putting our energy where it matters most. The habit of placing our mental and spiritual resources, as well as our earthly wealth, where Christ might put them.

The daily practice of generosity puts us in touch with God's own generosity. We learn to recognize God's routine grace in each small thing. *Where can you find such a market?* asks Rumi, *where one flower can buy you a hundred flowers; where a seed can be exchanged for a whole wilderness; where your weak breath can become the Divine breath.*

The practice of generosity teaches us not to dwell in fear. Through the habit of giving things away, we learn to place the foundation of our security *in God* rather than *in things*. We come to know that we will not overcome the fear or the grief of our Separation by *amassing stuff*, however much this stuff may be pleasurable or fun.

Through being generous we not only do as Christ did, but we think as *Christ thought*. We learn to think economically, but using God's idea of thrift. *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

So, my friends: let us begin, in this our church, to develop a daily practice of sacred generosity. Let's muster our courage, focus our intention, and pledge to ourselves today, to being our walk down that pilgrim path. Let me suggest that we do this, in three concrete ways:

The first way is: to *give three times a day*. Make a gift of some physical thing, donate away some money, give of our effort. At the beginning, the middle, and the end of each day.

The second way is: to *give increasingly to people whom we abhor*. We might begin by giving to those whom we love: our friends, our family, our church. Then work our way up to those we don't care about, people we don't know. Then, for the master's class, push ourselves through to those self-absorbed, self-important, ugly people, whom we find completely repugnant. If we can emulate Christ by being generous to the undeserving, then, we will no longer need to carry around the stuff of God in tiny plastic cups.

The Third way is: *let us give specifically our church*. Let's make our spiritual home the beginning place for our spiritual pilgrimage. Not because the church needs our support, although she very much does, and not because God has been generous with us, although He certainly, certainly has, and not even because God calls us especially to support this community, although the sound of that call is still fresh in our ears. But rather, because it is *here*, in our church, that is the *best* place for us, each of us, to being our most sacred walk, to start our daily habit of Christian generosity.

Let us do this now, and let us do this for our own souls: learn to see the generosity of God; learn to quiet the tight wad voice; learn to refine the selfish inner chatter; learn to break loose from fear; learn to live by the divine economy; learn to bridge the separation. Learn to swim freely in the huge fluid blessing.