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'Tangibilitate'

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Mar. 1, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

Dare we live in the world envisioned in the Great Sermon? Dare we live by an ethic that acknowledges God's dominion over all of human life and history? Dare we allow ourselves to be regarded as fools when we refuse to hate or take revenge, or when we refuse to answer violence against us in kind? Dare we exchange earthly treasure for what survives beyond the grave? Dare we admit that we are the wealthy and powerful who are indicted and convicted in the Great Sermon?

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 49:14-15
Psalm 62
1 Corinthians 4:1-5
Matthew 6:24-34

We may not be sufficiently daring. We tend to view the challenges of the Great Sermon from a distance, as a lovely ideal, albeit an unattainable one. But the power of the sacred texts does not permit our cowardice or our desire to go through life undisturbed by the demands made upon us by virtue of our belonging to Jesus.

The late theologian William Stringfellow insisted that those who dare to accept and to live the life set forth in the Great Sermon must enter into the politics of the kingdom, which urges us to set aside the lust for money and for goods that is so central to our own capitalist society, and seek first the kingdom of God (An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land, Wipf and Stock, 2004). This is the realm in which God -- and those who profess to believe in and belong to God -- will use not only their surplus, but their very substance to reach out and alleviate the burdens of the needy.

God's concern for the poor, as Jim Wallis has pointed out, is so pronounced that this theme consumes one out of every 16 verses in the New Testament, one out of every 10 in the Synoptic Gospels and one out of every seven in Luke (*God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). Once we accept God's predilection for the world's least ones and make it our own politic, then the world envisioned in the Great Sermon becomes less ethereal and more radically real.

In an effort to drive home the necessity of an altruistic and practical faith, the late Peter Gomes cited the example of one of America's most famous black preachers, Father Divine (*The Good Book*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). Active in New York's Harlem in the 1930s, Father Divine urged those who attended his services to make their faith real by giving real gifts for the poor. "You got to learn how to tangibilitate!" he would roar, and the gifts would come pouring in. Until we learn how to "tangibilitate," the

cries of God's least ones will testify to our greed, our self-absorption and our apathy.

Once we have learned to open our purses and our hearts and "tangibilitate," then we must also learn to set aside our worries and preoccupation with material things and trust in God. That trust, as the prophet so beautifully attests in today's first reading, is founded in the very character of God, whose love is without limit or condition. Had the pledge of divine love been quoted in its entirety, believers would have been assured, "See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name" (Isaiah 49:16). In today's Gospel, the Matthean Jesus builds on this divine reassurance, advising his followers to cast worry aside and rely with full confidence in the God who takes excellent care of the birds of the air and the flowers in the fields. Jesus invites his own to realize their worth in God's eyes: If God is so lavish in caring for the birds and flowers and grasses of the field, will God not also provide for you? It is in that moment of crystal-clear logic that believers are asked to choose their future. Will we seek God first and foremost and entrust ourselves fully to God and the kingdom, or will we choose to drown ourselves in worry?

As we make this choice, Chris Altrock warns us that we might be compared to Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, central character of The Idiot ("New Rules for the Game of Life," *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount*, Chalice Press, 2007). Thrust into a culture obsessed with wealth, Myshkin was so unconcerned with material things and so lacking in greed or envy that his contemporaries thought him "abnormal" and wrote him off as an idiot. Already in the first Christian century, Paul understood that many would regard him as "abnormal" or "idiotic" for his embrace of Jesus and the kingdom. Nevertheless, and with full awareness, he declared, "We are fools on Christ's account!" (1 Corinthians 4:10). Dare we say the same?

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