

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 24 October 2010, based upon the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.*

A Gallup Poll study in February of this year queried 150 church-going adults in three different states, all of whom were between the ages of 35 and 60. 50 of them were Lutherans, 50 were non-denominational Evangelicals, and 50 were Roman Catholics. Gallup asked each person to comment about the current economic recession and how or whether it affects their practice of Christianity. Of the 150 people, only 9 said the economy affected negatively their faith or religious practice. When asked to rank the importance between cultivating financial well-being with cultivating spiritual well-being 112 of them (75%) said that spiritual well-being was 5x more important than feeling financially secure.

I hope I would have answered similarly; nevertheless, there's something about my desire to achieve financial security. Maybe there is in you at times, as there is in me, an engine that revs so fast trying to acquire things, or to make more money, or to spin doggedly to get life under control. Yet I think if Gallup polled each of us, many would say we want more than what culture defines as the "good life."

Wouldn't we say God creates us for connection; that we're hardwired for relationship, that we seek communion and reconciliation with all people?

A friend and colleague, Robbin Clarke, retired last week after nearly 20 years as the rector of a parish in Berkeley, California. Among many of Robbin's gifts is the ability to speak about money, and stewardship. I'll never forget something she said to me, during a time in my life when I was really struggling with money. Student loan and credit card debt were crushing me, and yet I felt obligated to save for the future, and also, sadly, to create the so-called good life with nice things. I was whining to Robbin about all this...the need to save money, and the fact that I had all these expenses. She listened for a long time, and then she said it. "There's a third way." She paused hoping I'd identify it. Finally she said, "you can give it away. There are three things to do with money: save, spend, and give."

Robbin's words challenged my thinking about getting the good life. It's not about working hard enough, saving enough time and money, teaching our children to be good citizens, and generally living by the golden rule. When we make the mistake of equating financial security with spiritual well-being we lose sight of our first object of desire which is to love and to be loved. In my life it is Jesus who has shown me the the most concrete and human example of this way.

He tells today a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector, presenting a central theological point: thinking we can do it ourselves, or living self-righteously, doesn't work. These two men go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stands by himself and prays quite impressively. You know well that the Pharisees were dependable, honest, good folk who contributed to the community. The Pharisee says his prayers, gives more than he has to, and the consequence is that lots of people benefit from his generosity. He was, frankly, like us. The problem is that he has nothing to ask God. He simply provides a progress report, and a litany of thanks.

Meanwhile, standing off at a distance, is the tax collector who has earned his living by working for a foreign government to collect huge taxes from his own people, and pocketing much of it for

himself. He's a crook, and he knows it. But he knows, somehow, that he needs God. Like every good parable the story purposely turns everything upside down: the Pharisee came asking nothing of God and he goes home with nothing from God. The tax collector shows up empty handed, asks for God's mercy, and goes home in right relationship with God.

The temptation is to take this parable about God's amazing grace and say to ourselves "if I'm just humble like the tax collector, and not puffed up like the Pharisee, then I'll be all set." We can't earn God's love. We can only use our hard-wiring for relationship, to ask, "do you love me?" and then listen for God's resounding and forever reply, "Yes!"

The two men in the parable were praying in the temple because they had a relationship with God. But they had something else in common. They also had a relationship with money. And we do too. There isn't a single person in this church who doesn't have a relationship with money. Some of us have a great relationship with it, and some of us are struggling terribly with it, and those of us who are struggling are doing so not necessarily because we have too little, but rather because we have too much.

The annual commitment campaign for this parish is underway. And next Sunday we'll present our pledge cards, walking up to the edge of these steps, and placing them here for the whole community to see that we belong, that the good life is actually about a relationship with God known in Jesus the Christ, lived joyously within a community called to be the Parish of the Epiphany.

Let me say a few things about the pledge card itself. Don't dismiss it; the actual card is really important. It's a physical *thing* that expresses commitment. It's a way to show your circuitry for being loved and loving. If you are part of this community, or if you want to be part of this community, regardless if you can or are willing to make a financial contribution, please fill out the pledge card and come forward with it next Sunday. If you can't be here next Sunday, mail it to us. The pledge card is the outward sign of our desire. Returning it, giving it to God, says we understand we're created for love by love.

In that Berkeley cafe 13 years ago, Robbin Clarke gave me a great gift. Robbin, and her words, blessed me, and now, among the three things I do with money, the part about it I most love, is giving it away.

Money matters to our spiritual life--even the Gallup Poll gets this. In these days of economic uncertainty and anxiety, especially in these days, your church will speak clearly about how money and possessions will never save us. You'll continue to hear me, and other leaders, invite you to give your money to God, through this church, emphasizing that giving is primarily about giving to God, and less about giving to the church. The church benefits from it, absolutely, but we make our commitments because of God's wideness in giving us faith, and because of God's generosity in giving us the Parish of the Epiphany in which to practice that faith.

We'll also do something else: we'll underscore the abiding truth that our relationship with Jesus Christ is the thing that matters the most, and that in seeking and finding *that truth* we will have achieved the ultimate good life.