

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH *The Practice of Carrying Water: Physical Labor*

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
November 7-8, 2009 ♦ Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Genesis 3:8-19

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Mark 12: 38-44

As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

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Mark 12:43-44

One of the things Barbara Brown Taylor has been emphasizing in her book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* is that all of life is holy; all of life is sacred; all of life, even the stuff of the ordinary, and the mundane, and the everyday, holds the potential for spiritual practice and a deepened connection with God. This is true for physical labor as well. Taylor says that physical labor

remains a reliable path to the rudiments of life. Cleaning refrigerators and toilets helps you connect the food cycle at both ends. Making beds reminds you that life-giving activities do not require much space. Hanging laundry on the line offers you a chance to fly prayer flags disguised as bath towels and underwear. If all life is holy, then anything that sustains life has holy dimensions too. The difference between washing windows and resting in God can be a simple decision: choose the work, and it becomes your spiritual practice. Spraying vinegar and water on the panes, you baptize the glass. Rubbing away the film, ye repent ye of your sins. Polishing the glass, you let in the light. No task is too menial to serve as a path.

All of this reminds me of one of my favorite songs, written by Carrie Newcomer, who is no stranger to many of us here at Cross Creek. She is a modern day Christian mystic for sure. I wish I could sing the song for you, but that would be way to distracting. Instead, listen to the poetry of her lyrics:

*Holy is the dish and drain
The soap and sink, the cup and plate
The warm wool socks, and the cold white tile
Showerheads and good dry towels*

*And frying eggs sound like psalms
With bits of salt measured in my palm
It's all a part of a sacrament
As holy as a day is spent*

*Holy is the busy street
The cars that boom with passion's beat
And the check out girl, counting change
The hands that shook my hands today*

*And hymns of geese fly overhead
and spread their wings like their parents did
Blessed be the dog
That runs in her sleep
That chase some wild, elusive thing*

*Holy is the familiar room and the quiet moments in the afternoon
And folding sheets like folding hands
To pray as only laundry can*

*I'm letting go of all I fear
Like autumn leaves of earth and air
For summer came and summer went
As holy as a day is spent*

*Holy is the place I stand
To give whatever small good I can
The empty page, the open book
Redemption everywhere I look*

*Unknowingly we slow our pace
In the shade of unexpected grace
With grateful smiles and sad lament
As holy as a day is spent*

*And morning light sings "providence"
As holy as a day is spent*

(Carrie Newcomer, "Holy as a Day is Spent" from *The Gathering of Spirits* CD, 2001)

If you have Carrie's *The Gathering of Spirits* CD...listen to her sing it. It is a powerful prayer, a call to deep and everyday spiritual practice, and a mystical experience like no other.

It is interesting to note that most of us carry with us the idea that physical labor, and toil of any kind, is God's curse, having been foisted on us because of Adam and Eve's great fall! And I'll be the first to admit that I have on many an occasion cursed Adam and Eve when I have been

exhausted and bothered for having to keep our landscaping beds trimmed, and weeded and mulched! I have cursed Adam and Eve for causing so much trouble and ache just to keep our yard looking decent and respectable. However, in an odd twist to conventional wisdom, Taylor suggests that physical labor should not be seen as a curse, but as a sacrament...as something holy and sacred...as a practice that can lead us into a deeper experience of God...as something that offers us the opportunity of being deeply connected with other humans and the human experience.

In the second chapter of Genesis we read that God created “man.” But we are not talking about gender specificity here. The Hebrew word is *adam*, from which we get the name Adam, which means “earthling.” The word *adam* comes from *adamah* or “earth.” So what God created is not the male species but a mud-baby, a dirt-person, a dust-creature. And it is into this earthling that God breathed into its nostrils the breath of life and a human, living being arose from the ground.

Genesis then tells us that the next thing God did was plant a garden and God put the “earthling” in the middle of the garden to keep it. And as Taylor reminds us “this was before all the trouble with the snake. This was even before the earthling had a partner.”

Then, God decided that a companion would be good for earthling and so God fashioned one from earthling’s bone. It is at this point in the story that we now have man and woman, that male is distinguishable from female. In Hebrew we get *ish* and *ishah*, “man” and “woman”. Both come from the same source and the life and breath they share comes from the same place. You can either call it ground or you can call it God.

And then you know what came next. Taylor describes it this way:

Later, after the incident with the snake, God evicts these two from the garden. Curses are involved – enmity with humans for the snake, pain in childbirth for the woman, sweaty toil for the man. The ground itself is cursed on account of human error, producing thorns and thistles to go along with its red berries and purple flowers. The earthlings’ short tenure in Eden comes to a sad and sudden end.

Distracted by such furious activity, many readers of this story have somehow gotten the idea that physical labor is part of God’s curse – labor pains for the woman and field labor for the man – until labor itself gets all mixed up with punishment. Clearly, this is not so. The earthling’s first divine job is to till the earth and keep it. If you have ever tilled a rose garden, much less a garden of Eden, then you know that this is difficult to do without getting sore shoulders. Keeping the earth is hard work. You get dirty doing it. You break fingernails and wear holes in the knees of your pants. You wear yourself out.

You also remember where you came from, and why. You touch the stuff your bones are made of. You handle the decomposed bodies of trees, leaves, birds, and fallen stars. Your body recognizes its kin. If you have nerve enough, you also foresee your own decomposition. This is not bad knowledge to have. It is the kind that puts other kinds in perspective. Feel that cool dampness? Welcome back to earth, you earthling. Smell the dirt? Welcome home, you beloved dust-creature of God.

All of this puts the Simone Weil (pronounced see-MAHN Vay) quote on the front of your bulletin in some context. Simone Weil was a French philosopher, social activist, and like Carrie Newcomer, a Christian mystic in her day. She noted that

He who is aching in every limb, worn out by the effort of a day of work, that is to say a day when he has been subject to matter, bears the reality of the universe in his flesh like a thorn. The difficulty for him is to look and to love. If he succeeds, he loves the Real.

Which makes me wonder if that is why the widow in our gospel reading today “put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Maybe that is why Jesus called the disciples over to witness the power of this woman’s giving. Maybe *she*, who bore the universe in her flesh like a thorn, knew how to look and love the Real.

Church stewardship campaigns, or annual pledge drives, are not complete without this gospel text about the widow’s mite. This year, this text just happens to show up in November in the cycle of the lectionary, which happens to be the time when most churches, including ours, conduct their annual stewardship campaigns. Any stewardship emphasis without the widow and her penny would be like having Christmas without presents, Easter without egg hunts and Thanksgiving without a turkey! She is the epitome of Christian giving, who does what the rich young ruler could not do: she gave everything she had.

But if you study this text closely, or if, God forbid, you have to preach it, you’ll find out real quick that there are “issues” with this text. And if you talk about these issues openly, more than likely the church stewardship committee will not be pleased!

Should this widow be exalted for giving to a corrupt and dying temple? The temple’s scribes are condemned for devouring widows’ houses and in the very next chapter in Mark, Jesus declares that the temple will be destroyed, that “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Mark 13:2). Some people read this text and see the widow as being duped by organized and perverted religion and think of all the poor little old widow women today sending money that they need for food and medicine to the likes of Pat Robertson or Benny Hinn or any number of ubiquitous televangelists.

In addition, the text does not lift up for praise those who give “out of their abundance.” And we all know that it is hard to raise the necessary dollars to run a church one penny at a time!

But today, in light of our theme from Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, I am wondering if this women’s poverty put her so close to the ground that she saw each day, and life itself, and the physical labor it took just to survive, as a gift...as “grace upon grace.”

We might say that the widow was not a poor widow; she was poor because she was a widow. In those days there was probably no such thing as a rich widow, as in the late Virginia Kettering. Women of that time and culture were completely dependent on men for their status and their livelihood. In those days, if a woman’s husband died, it was a double tragedy because it meant almost certain poverty, unless the male relatives of the husband were willing to take you in, or the community took pity upon your plight. The death of a mate almost instantly changed a woman’s status, and the size of her pocketbook.

The two little coins in the widow’s hand were most likely all she had. They could have been pennies, they could even have been nickels or dimes, but they were not enough to remove her from the welfare rolls and place her in the middle class.

It might have been easy for her to give them up, she knew she could beg for more and that they most likely would never make a big difference to her life or to the temple treasury. When we have so little, it is easier to give it away. We know that it won’t change our status or our economic condition all that much.

It’s a different story for those of us who have more than less. Money gives us independence and freedom; it provides us so much more than shelter and food. For those of us in the congregation today who have been out of work for awhile or have to struggle to make ends meet, you know from another vantage point, how money provides us with more than mere means of survival.

Money provides us with autonomy, a sense of security and a sense of invulnerability in the world.

The widow wasn't dependent on the money for anything at all. She was vulnerable and she knew it. So she gave what she had to God because she knew where the line of independence was drawn. She was dependent on God for everything—everything she needed and hoped to have would come from the grace of God. Or, as Janice Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose."

I think her kind of giving springs from a core conviction about the goodness and the grace of God. She knew that to live she was totally and utterly dependent on God for all she was and all she would ever receive. She knew in the center of her being that God is good and that the goodness of God would be revealed to her throughout her life. Perhaps this is the kind of learning one gets when one is close to the ground, when one's body aches from bearing the universe in one's flesh like a thorn. Perhaps you find yourself more in touch with the cycles of the earth and its everyday goodness and graces.

Today, I hope you are grateful for the abundant Life you are given. And the irony of our story suggests that this abundance is not defined by your salary or your possessions but by an abundance centered in the *Ground* of All Being...in God. I hope you can offer a ready testimony that "From Jesus fullness you, too, have received, grace upon grace." Because it is from *that* fullness, *that* grace, *that* abundance that I ask you to consider your pledge for the coming year and to honor God's surprising abundance in your life as well as in the life of this congregation and its important work and witness in the world.

By November 22, all of us are being asked to make our stewardship pledge for the year 2010. Our stewardship materials have given us programmatic and financial reasons for giving, but the widow has given us the example of giving...of a giving rooted in the deep trust of God's goodness that springs forth in abundant gratitude and generosity. The widow is demonstrating in her own life the surprising abundance of God's grace...of everyday grace...of "grace upon grace."

But the truth is that in our culture and context, our ability and willingness to give stems from our toil and labor. And I hear from many of you that your work is wearing you flat out and it comes with a lot of thorns; like stress; like being asked to do more with much less. So I'm wondering this morning, along with Simone Weil, if we can look upon all our labor, physical or otherwise, with Love...see it as an everyday practice that not only puts us in touch with God, but also with all of God's aching humanity, and that somehow, out of that bone aching weariness and exhaustion, we will find the source of that which is Real...which is Grace...and from *that* Source will flow gratitude and generosity.

I conclude with the same words that conclude Barbara Brown Taylor's chapter on "The Practice of Carrying Water: Physical Labor." She writes:

Many years ago now, I volunteered at a city shelter for people with nowhere to sleep. In the summertime, there were nights with vacant beds, but never in wintertime. The minute the temperature dipped below freezing, the line outside would stretch around the block. Regular volunteers rotated through all the jobs required to make the place go: checking people in, cooking and serving supper, keeping peace through the night, cleaning up in the morning. I was not a regular volunteer, but as a clergyperson at the host church I thought I should show up at least once a season.

On the night I am remembering I did a little bit of everything, including playing cards with the overnight guests. I slept in a chair, but only for a few hours. By 6:00 a.m., it was time to empty the place out so the volunteers could get to their regular jobs. The cleanup list included everything from stacking the mattresses to sweeping the floors. It is unclear to me how I ended up with the job of cleaning the toilets. Was it the clergy thing? Or was it because I only showed up once a season?

Whatever it was, the toilets were mine – all three of them – all smelling of vomit, all

splattered with diarrhea, all slick with urine. Short of falling headfirst into a septic tank, I could not imagine anything worse, which made it the perfect job for me. Scrubbing the bowls one by one, I thought of Saint Francis kissing lepers. I thought of Jesus washing feet. I thought of Mother Teresa bathing the dying of Calcutta. By time I reached the third bowl I was entirely out of spiritual fantasies, which left me free to remember that I too used toilets, occasionally as these toilets had been used. I was made of the same stuff as other humans. What came out of me smelled no better than what came out of anyone else. Welcome back to earth, you earthling. Welcome home, you beloved dirt-person of God.

That was a morning to remember, but life offers no shortage of opportunities to engage physical labor. Sometimes the work comes attached to an ice storm, offering you little choice but to freeze or to cope. Other times it presents itself to you as drudgery, which you may turn into soul work by choosing the labor instead of resenting it. However the openings come to you, they offer you the chance to bear the reality of the universe in your flesh like a thorn. The difficulty, Simone Weil says, is to look upon them with love. Succeed at that, and you can be sure that what you love is Real, leading you deeper into the More that is your heart's desire.

And for your information, don't bother trying to call me this afternoon. I've got a ton of leaves to rake into mountains for the boys to jump into and I've got some landscape beds to tend before winter. And I'm sure, that come Monday, I will be sore, but the practice of a little physical labor will do me a world of good. However, as I work today I will approach it with new eyes and an enlarged vision...I will be rooting and grounding myself in the earth, in what is Real, in what is God, in what is Love!

And how could I not ...on this stunningly beautiful, breathtakingly awesome Ohio autumn day?

Grace upon grace it is. Grace upon grace. Amen.