

Having and Sharing

**Study One in The Ekklesia Project's
Congregational Formation Initiative**
Basic Strokes Series

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Introduction

By now, you've spent some time together thinking about what formation is, how we get formed whether we intend it or not, and what being formed as "church" means. Learning to be sign, foretaste, and servant of the reign of God is our way of joyfully embracing the gifts God has given us: forgiveness, hope, and our brothers and sisters. By steeping ourselves in the stories of God's work and practices that "presume and reinforce" our faith in that God, we build up ways of life, shared habits, maybe even institutions that allow us to be the people God has freed us to be.

Our aim in these next conversations is to use skills and ideas from these earlier sessions on what it means to be church and deepen them by working on a particular area of difficulty and importance: the way we own and use and share material goods.

Imagine a visitor stops by one day and asks, "What is your congregation like?" You could show them where and how you worship, or how you do a potluck or construct the decorations for a holiday or how you take care of families faced with births and deaths. And in doing so, you might feel like you are only showing the externals. How do we show someone the love and the faith that really matter?

On the other hand, what do we mean by "our love" and "our faith" if not what we do with our time, our bodies, our resources? In fact, the worship and potlucks and mutual care are not just external signs; they are our way of being and becoming God's people. When Jesus called Peter and James, leaving their nets wasn't just an external sign of their response to his call. It *was* their response to his call. If they hadn't left their nets, they couldn't have followed.

This is really just the way human life works. Staying up all night with a sick child, remaining faithful to a spouse in hard times, remembering a birthday with a long-distance phone call. Without these, what would family, marriage, friendship be? These relationships develop and deepen through the time, care, and resources we put into them. The 'invisible' important things—trust, mutual understanding, kindness—aren't actually invisible, because those qualities are things we see in what people do with their bodies and their resources. To put it another way, friendship means "mi casa est su casa."

The same principle actually applies to our spiritual life. Often people speak as though their spiritual and material lives were distinct parts of our one existence. And it's quite true that a person's faith can't be assessed by a quick look at his or her clothes or car. On the other hand, a long hard look at what I do with my body and my resources can be pretty revealing, both about what is "in my heart" and about what I'm training my heart to hold to.

This is what Paul means when he says that we are to live according to the spirit, not according to the flesh. He's not saying that we don't need to bother with material

questions about how our bodies and possessions are part of our discipleship. Certainly not! Rather, he's saying that we, embodied creatures that we are, are to order the whole of our lives "according to the spirit" which is concerned for "life and peace." (Rom 8:6). Those who live spiritually forgive and bear one another's burdens, speak patiently and live temperately. The spiritual life is real, and it really is conducted in material circumstances that matter. Paul, after all, saw taking up and delivering a collection for the Jerusalem church as essential to his ministry, even after he'd been warned that he would be arrested in Jerusalem.

So as we go deeper in congregational formation, we don't turn away from salaries and land and bills and musical instruments and houses, as though the heart of our lives were to be found somehow by leaving material things behind. Rather, we want to look at our work on and our use of such things to understand better our Christian freedom and to give ourselves more fully to Jesus, our flesh and blood Lord, in our ongoing friendship with him. The story of God's loving work among us is a story that happens in the flesh, through hunger and plenty and work and rest—and we are still part of that same story unfolding now in the church.

Conversation 1 Why is it Hard to Talk about Possessions?

“And the young man went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

“Ethics” makes people anxious. That is a great shame, because ethics is supposed to be about learning to embrace Jesus’ gifts of healing and joy. That’s the goal, but for most of us, it doesn’t feel that way. Why? For one thing, discussions of ethics are sometimes set up to be tragic, extreme cases: no happy outcome is on the menu. Who will get pushed out of the lifeboat? To which of the people on the waiting list will we give the kidney? Is it better to torture the terrorist or to let the bomb go off? That is not the kind of ethics we will be doing in these discussions. The “ethics” that makes a congregation a congregation is in our everyday habits, the routine decisions we make day in and out over the years to build up our shared life. It is the years of developing those habits that we become the people who either face crises well or badly, and so the essential work is not in deciding how to handle the crisis, but in becoming the people who are free in good times and in bad times to follow Jesus.

Consider the story of Le Chambon, a village in France where five thousand Christians sheltered five thousand Jews during the Nazi occupation. When a Jewish man who had been born there and sheltered during his infancy came to ask the Christians of that village why they did this thing, risking their own safety for that of strangers, they replied again and again, “It was the normal thing to do.” “It was what any human would do.” Or as one woman put it, “We were used to it.”

In her native French, that woman said they were “habitués”: they were in the habit. Those who waited until the crisis to become people who welcomed the stranger had in many cases waited too late. But this village had habits that made them ready. Many of those who lived there were descendants of Huguenots, who had been persecuted by the French government in the 18th century, so they were accustomed to discerning how obeying God’s law might set them in opposition to human law. They knew themselves as part of a story in which people had to suffer to be faithful to God. Most of those in the village were also peasants, who knew how to tighten their belts through hard winters. Living with some discomfort and danger for the sake of their consciences and for each other’s survival was for them “the normal thing to do.”

The story is inspiring, but for many of us, when we return to our own lives and try to talk about our habits regarding property—how we get it, use it, and share it—suddenly we feel a little awkward. In many conversations, we’ve heard people raise concerns such as these.

- “It’s like beggars: I want to help out the one guy, but if you give to that one, then you’ll have a hundred around you. My faith calls me to be generous, yes, but how then do I draw a line to ensure that I and the people for whom I’m responsible will have enough? The terrible truth is that there isn’t enough, and I don’t know how to deal with that.”

- “I just don’t want to say anything that will make someone else think I judge them. I know that we all have different needs and abilities, and I don’t assume I know how other people’s finances work. So who am I to talk about what other people ought to do with their stuff? I’m not sure about it myself.”
- “Everybody talks about not being greedy, about living simply, and I’m on board. But what is enough? Is it OK that I have a collection of music CDs? Can I go on a vacation? Should I send the kids to public schools or should I save up to send them to a private Christian school? Or do I have to give it all away and become poor myself? The questions seem endless.”
- “There’s just no good answer—I mean, so many of our goods are produced by workers not paid a living wage or by methods that have bad effects on God’s good creation. But if you increase wages or put restrictions on businesses, that causes other problems for the economy. We talk and talk, but we haven’t found a way to make things much better than they are.”
- “I have convictions about this kind of thing, but I find it hard to talk with others about it. It’s so personal, and we’re just going to end up arguing. I think it may be better just to trust each other to make good decisions on our own about this kind of thing.”
- “A lot of people in my congregation have more than I do, and I know that. I don’t want their pity. Whenever we start talking about this kind of thing, that’s the direction it goes.”
- “I have some nice things and I don’t mind sharing them, but it’s not as easy as that. Sometimes people walk into my house and see my nice things, and a wall goes up between us: I have stuff they don’t have and probably won’t ever afford, and it’s like we can’t quite be honest with each other anymore. Getting into the material stuff can actually hurt a relationship.”
- “When we start talking about this, it’s like there’s no joy, no fun left in things. I don’t want to have to feel guilty about taking my kids to the pool or watching a movie. I don’t think I should feel guilty, but I know there are so many people in poverty... so many that I do feel guilty.”

Most of our anxieties amount to fears of some sort or the other: fear of judging or of being judged; fear of poverty; fear of conflict with others; fear that God asks of us something that we cannot do without doing violence to ourselves.

At such moments, it may help to remember the story of David’s house. David tells the prophet he wants to honor God: how is it that I live in a house of cedar when the Lord God dwells in a tent? But David’s idea of honoring God by building a temple is to make

Israel's God into an imperial power, adorned in the wealth of competing nations. He's trying to make Israel safer by making God more like the God of other nations, more in his own image, more manageable, more easily and securely located.

Our God does like to turn the tables. The security of Israel in its God is not to be turned into a national monument or proof of imperial power. So God promises David: "I will make a house for you." God's own faithfulness through time will be Israel's glory and safety, and that is a security far beyond anything David or Solomon could produce. We cannot make ourselves secure, but our faithful and true God is a security other than and greater than anything we could imagine. Our job is not to be afraid to let God lead us, even into uncharted territory.

In fact, being a truthful people means being a people who know their God is true, trustworthy. We can talk about uncomfortable things, not because we are sure we can control them, but because God is true. We have met truth in person, in Jesus, and he tells us not to fear. In fact, when we say that Jesus is Truth, we mean that the deepest revelation about the nature of reality is God's faithful and overflowing love for us.

At the end of "The Shape of God's Reign," we talked about being a community whose God is true and who are filled with the Spirit of that truth. But of course, being that truthful people also takes practice! It, like taking care of each other in hard times, has to be cultivated as a habit. We have to be reminded that God is both truth and mercy for us; we have to practice being God's faithful, true, and merciful people. Dealing with our anxieties about wealth is not about wishing them away, but about practicing our faith in God's truthfulness together.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What stories are you part of, in the way the people of Le Chambon were part of the story of Huguenot faithfulness? What stories did you learn as children or repeat in church or for your children, and what habits do those stories encourage you to develop?

Has your congregation gone through moments like David's discovery that God wants to provide for us better (and differently) than we can imagine? What practices do you have as a community to help you recall God's faithfulness?

Earlier in this chapter a number of concerns were listed that thoughtful Christians often raise about the "messiness" of talking about our possessions. With which of these do you most resonate? What other concerns do you have yourself or have you heard expressed by others?

Many Christians avoid difficult conversations such as these because they believe conflict should always be avoided. Do you agree, or do you think that conflict is a normal and important dimension of community life? If we think conflict is normal, even for Christians, then how do we square this with our call to be a sign of God's reconciling work?

Conversation 2 Self-reliance and the Body of Christ

As we learn to be God's truthful people, a sign and agent of the reconciliation that's at the heart of God's reign, we need to be able to hear and speak truthfully and mercifully. But we also have to think about what to say to whom, and when. Not every truth needs to be spoken in every place. We've probably all found ourselves at some point hearing more medical details than we needed to hear, or about details of an argument in which we had no part and which become an obstacle to our own relationships. Yet some truths ought to be spoken in *more* places. For example, the difficulty many of us have in telling each other about our needs and pains closes off our chances to be the sign of God's reign. How can we tell the difference between what should and should not be spoken?

More to the point, how should we make such judgments when it comes to our possessions? Often people talk about their finances only with close family and maybe a financial advisor. In fact, some people are far more likely to talk about finances with a financial advisor than with family! As in our conversations with a doctor, our motives here can be complicated. We don't want to bore everyone with the details, or we're embarrassed to discuss our errors in judgment. We may be shy about parading success as well, as that can put our less-successful friends off and attract false friends. And fundamentally, we tend to think of our possessions as a private matter, and that sets the tone when we speak about them.

What is privacy? It is not only teenagers with diaries who worry about privacy; protection of privacy is an important topic in US law and culture. This is an issue that matters, deeply, to many of us, and it isn't necessarily because we have something to hide. It's more that as we grow up, we want to be able to be on our own, to make our own mistakes, to become our own person. There's a certain amount of privacy that's required in that process, just because we need to be able to work things out ourselves. The idea of 'private property' is an extension of this insight. Having resources to work with, being responsible for them, and reaping the fruits (sweet and sour) of our efforts—this is how we learn to be ourselves and mature into adults.

It may not be our intention, but this line of thought tends to leave us with the impression that a whole person is one who creates and sustains him or herself. A person who asks for help or depends on others seems to be off the track of mature, whole personhood. When we have to let others into this life of "our own," we feel restricted and reduced, and maybe embarrassed.

Years ago, while working in a soup kitchen, I met a hard-working, good-natured older man who had been reduced to poverty when his wife suffered from a catastrophic illness while uninsured. He first lost his small business and his house, but then he also lost his relationship with his daughter because when he had to live as a dependent in her house, they could not get along. They argued bitterly, not least over his difficulty in accepting her help. He moved out and ended up living in a flophouse and working at the soup kitchen as a requirement for receiving public support.

We grew to be friends, and when he got sick, he came to live at my house. Eventually he had to go to the hospital, and as his illness grew more grave and he fell into unconsciousness, a social worker traced down his daughter. In periods of lucidity over the next few weeks until his death, he and his daughter reconciled, and she told me that she was amazed at how much more tolerant and patient he had become. It seems he had learned, by a very tough route, how to accept help from her, and that had been his best and last gift to her.

St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) told his associates that they had to love the poor very much to get them to forgive the offense of being given charity. There's a lot of wisdom in that: people's pride is hurt when they have to accept help. Giving in ways that protect their dignity is an important and delicate skill. But look a little deeper. Why is our dignity hurt when we ask our brothers and sisters for help? Why are we offended by assistance? Because we think mature people are supposed to be self-sufficient, not like a child.

And that's when we see that this way of thinking and acting is a problem. When Jesus spoke of becoming like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven, he was talking about a class of people who are financially dependent, not in control or self-sufficient. Children have to ask for what they need (and they do it repeatedly and in ways that can be quite irritating). To be like a child, in this sense, is to be really, concretely, dependent on the care of others. The mature Christian, who has become like a child, is one who has learned to have faith, hope, and love... none of which particularly flourish when we are proudly making our own way.

As Christians mature, we do not go off alone to prove ourselves as individuals. In our congregations, we come, all of us unworthy, to God's generosity in baptism. We don't earn our way and we don't become independent as we grow. In fact, we grow by being made into a body, Christ's body. Our plenty and need that were occasions for fear, pride, and embarrassment become instead occasions for us to grow in mutual love, in trust, and in confidence in our faithful God. Our property *and our poverty* are not ours so that we can prove ourselves or make our own way, but so that we can practice loving each other in the way God calls us to do.

How does that change the way we approach each other's lives and needs? For one thing, it should help us challenge the idea that asking for help or offering help means that something has gone wrong. On the contrary, if we are to be known by our love, then our ability to know about each other's needs, to ask for help and to offer help, is essential to our calling as church! One of history's most Christ-like Christians, Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), told his followers that they should work steadily in lowly jobs, but if those jobs didn't pay enough for them to have what they needed, then they should be happy to ask other people to help them meet their daily needs. He wanted the brothers to be happy, not embarrassed, because they were creating the opportunity for those people to act out their love of God. When they hid their need, they were withholding that

opportunity. Instead of becoming mature persons through making it on their own, they practiced becoming mature in Christ.

What was right for Francis and his followers isn't automatically what we will want to do in our congregations, but their example reminds us that among the family of faith, we can learn to let each other know more freely what we have and what we need. Our story is not one of having to find our way on our own and having to leave each other alone to do that. Our story is about our baptism. We come, all of us unworthy, to God's generosity, and we grow as God's people by giving and receiving the various gifts God gives to the members of the body. If we live in that story, then instead of our plenty and need being occasions for fear, pride, and embarrassment, they can be occasions for us to grow in mutual love, in trust, and in confidence in our faithful God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Jesus commends those who ask for what they need. (For example, Mt. 7:7-9; Lk. 18:1-8; Mk. 10:46-52) What does your congregation need, and how are you asking for it? How do you decide what you should and should not ask for? How does your practice of praying for each other illuminate this matter?

What habits do you individually and as a congregation have for talking together about your needs and your resources? What habits do you have for dealing with legitimate concerns for privacy around questions of wealth and property?

1 Cor. 12 talks about the church as the body of Christ, in which the members have various gifts. In what ways is this true of your congregation? What gifts are given, asked for, and shared among you? How is the highest gift, love, shared? What gifts are you in need of?

Conversation 3 Thinking about Things

And God looked at all he had made and said, It is very good.

Human life happens through material stuff: feeding and clothing bodies, making and distributing products, mowing the lawn and taking out the garbage, using our voices and hands to speak to each other, typing words onto a page so that other people can hold them, read them, and go to some shared place to talk about them. The stuff of our lives is not just backdrop to our spiritual selves. Without that stuff, we would not be ourselves. As humans and therefore embodied, we *are* that stuff.

But it feels sometimes like our spirits are at war with matter. We may have too much of it or too little of it or the wrong kinds of it. Some days it feels like nothing works or like the things of the world just don't want to cooperate with our intentions. One of the biggest obstacles we face to prayer can be all the things that call for our attention, and simplifying our lives to cut back on those distractions may be an important step in our spiritual lives. Orthodox Christian thought, however, has consistently ruled out two extremes. On one side, it refuses the idea that the material world is itself evil and should be rejected; and on the other, it also refuses the notion that the material world is to be unqualifiedly embraced.

St. Augustine, the bishop and theologian of the late 4th and early 5th centuries, knew a lot about both of those extremes. In his youth, he lived for a time a life of decadent enjoyment of all the world had to offer, particularly food, sex, and the admiring attention of crowds. Confronted, though, with the illness and death of a young friend, he realized that these pleasures did not and could not last. So he rejected them as empty. He joined the Manichees, a group that believed matter is produced by an evil god who is at war with the good spiritual god. Those who want to pursue holiness therefore want to become purely spiritual. According to the Manichees, matter is what is wrong with us.

We call this dualism, and it does have a certain appeal. According to it, we are all deep down good and beautiful, but that "deep down" is hidden by all the stuff around us-- the things we want and cling to, the things we fight over or get addicted to. If we could just get free of all this stuff, and of the body that ties us to it, then we could find who we 'really' are, eternal and pure.

It's a convenient solution, but the Christian faith says our trouble is more complicated than that. For one thing, we are, in body and soul, sinful. What's more, we are, in body and soul, redeemed. It's not just the body or matter that causes our problems. For another thing, as Augustine came to understand that there can be only one God, he saw that all creation comes from a good creator. Matter, then, can't be evil -- because a good God made it.

That's good news: we live in a world that is made by a good God, and the world is made to be good. We don't have to escape our bodies and families and homes to find holiness.

Still those good created things can be bad for us, if we don't use them right. As Augustine explained it, none of the stuff is evil in itself. But when we try to rest our hearts in it instead of in God or when we try to use it in a way that doesn't help us love God more, then we have a problem.

Creation is made by God and good, but because of sin we live in a world where good things are out of order, not working as God intended them to, and we have inherited a tendency to disorder them ourselves. Land that should be used to care for the needs of all instead only serves the desires of a few; techniques that can fight disease become commodities that follow profit; materials that could be used for building become instead weapons of war; houses that could be places of hospitality and neighborliness become places for us to hide from each other. Creation is good; but sin means we don't use it rightly.

This basic principle helps make sense of a great deal of Christian practice. For example, Christians both fast and feast. The question is not whether food is good or evil, but how to use it so that it assists us in our journey to God. Ordinarily, we accept food with gratitude, share it with family and friends, and use it to nourish ourselves. Occasionally, however, many Christians refrain from eating. That's not because food is bad or because our bodies are evil, but because our true nourishment is in God alone, and we have to keep the goodness of food in that secondary place. We do that not just in theory, but by developing the skill of occasionally saying no. As our friend Augustine put it, "In this life, we ought not to love fullness." We should not, in other words, become satisfied (or so concerned for satisfaction), because then we forget our hunger for God. Fasting is one way we nurture the habit of seeking God above our own appetite for food.

And we do also feast. The traditional forty day Lenten fast culminates in the great fast during Good Friday and Holy Saturday. One of my favorite Easter celebrations was when, at the end of the vigil service through the night on Holy Saturday, after the resurrection has been proclaimed and new Christians baptized, the new fire lit and the alleluia sung, the whole congregation was invited to a party. In a room laid out with all kinds of food, full of flowers and music and good companionship, we celebrated Christ's triumph in our own lives. That feast traditionally continues for the fifty days of Easter, ten days longer than the fasting of Lent, because if there is a danger that we could mistake food for God, there is also a danger that we could enjoy our self-denial and make it into a source of pride. Even our own self-control is only a limited good. In both fasting and feasting, we are practicing becoming true lovers of God. The trick, Augustine helped us to see, is in knowing how to use the goods God gives us so that they are real goods, rather than letting them become traps for us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The practice of blessing food before we eat it reflects this same kind of discernment. Blessing food situates our meal in that larger story so that it has a function as a good, along the way to a greater Good. But that practice raises questions for us as well. For example, should we bless food that has been produced at the expense of someone else's health or well-being? What difference is there in blessing tomatoes from our backyard; tomatoes from a local farmer with ties to the church; and tomatoes picked by workers paid pennies per pound, housed in crowded trailers and unable to get medical assistance? Ought we to say a blessing over such food at all? If we do, what should we say?

Some Christians bless houses in a similar way. Should we perhaps say a blessing over clothing? Over paychecks? Over cars? How might such a practice change our understanding of these material goods?

Many people routinely speak of possessions as 'blessings.' When are they really blessings and when are they obstacles? How can you tell? How do we help each other tell the difference?

Conversation 4 The Honeymoon in the Desert

For Israel, wealth was always an element of God's blessing. How else could Abraham's family become as numerous as the stars? That's a lot of children to feed and clothe and house! Jacob and Joseph prospered in spite of adversity, and God protected even Joseph's jealous brothers by raising Joseph into a wealthy and powerful advocate for them. When Israel was called out of Egypt, they were promised a land flowing with milk and honey. Living in one's home, enjoying the fruits of the land and watching one's children grow strong and numerous—God intends these goods for Israel.

And if you will obey my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your cattle and you shall eat and be full. (Deut. 11:13-15)

That ought to give us pause. Is Augustine wrong? If God intends to bless Israel with these kinds of things, then maybe Augustine was a little over-wrought to say that we are in constant danger of preferring lesser goods to our One true good. God did not tell his people that they should not “love fullness”; rather, he told his people that he would bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. If creation is good and God called Israel out of slavery to live with plenty, then maybe we *should* love the fullness God provides! After all, Israel was commanded, by law, to feast on the bounty of the harvest. (Deut. 14:22-27)

The story of Israel, however, is not merely a story of blessing and prosperity. God does not bring Israel out of slavery and directly into the promised land. There is, between the two, the sojourn in the desert and the giving of law.

One of the oddest images in scripture is of a God who says, speaking as the husband of faithless Israel, “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.” (Hosea 2:14). A trip into the desert—lots of sand and wild animals, no food or water, extremes of heat and cold: how's that for a romantic getaway? But within the logic of the story, the desert *is* where God woos Israel, because it is there that Israel learns to lean on God and discovers just how faithful and true God really is.

God is deliverer for Israel as they escape Egypt, but it's painfully clear at that point in the story that their love for God is nothing more than their love for themselves. If God can liberate them, then all is fine. But as soon as the wilds of the desert appear, their attention wanders to whatever new god might do better for them. God wins Israel from the Egyptians through “a mighty arm,” but God has to win Israel's heart more slowly.

One of God's methods is the gift of manna. Every day, God provides food to sustain the people in spite of the hostile environment. But lest God move from being Israel's deliverer to being a divine delivery-boy, this manna is not to be hoarded during the week and it is not to be collected on the Sabbath. Everyone has enough on the days they

gather, but no extra; but on the day before the Sabbath, they collect enough for two days and it remains good for two days. Israel has to learn to be patient in their own vulnerability and to trust God.

This is a fine example of what we've been calling a practice: it both presumes and reinforces a way of life. It's only because Israel knows what God does that they continue to gather this food in this way; but every time they come out and find a new day's portion and every time they have enough for the Sabbath, that trust deepens.

The difficult thing about trust is that we only learn it by *having to* learn it. We only learn who is worthy of trust by exercising trust, by taking a risk. In the desert, Israel had to rely on God, and repeatedly, day after day, they discovered that the God who brought them out of Egypt was not going to abandon them now. They learned that God's strength freed them from fear and all the bitter social conflict that comes with it.

The desert brings us face-to-face with truths we don't face otherwise. Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove went to Iraq in the spring of 2002, to suffer with the Christians of Iraq and to make present for the Muslims of Iraq the love of Christ. They had no illusions about the Iraqi dictator and were careful not to provide information or support to that government, but they worried that if US Christians did not share in the suffering of this time in Iraq, then they could hardly claim to speak of God's love for the Iraqi people afterwards.

Convinced as they were that they had been called to be there, they were still terrified. As they traveled into the desert of western Iraq and faced the violence of war, their companion Jim Douglass said to them, "God will take care of us." The young couple realized as he said this that he did not mean that they would not get hurt. He meant that nothing that happened to them could separate them from God's love. And hearing his gentleness and confidence, they realized that they needed to develop a kind of trust that went deeper than lip service. They needed to see the world in a different way. Jonathan writes: "The chaos of the desert exposed the dark caverns of my own soul, depths that I did not know and could not understand because I had not faced them seriously before. What I could see was this: there is a difference between understanding theology and being transformed by God in our inner depths. The latter is required to see the reality that Jim could see. The desert had exposed my blindness."¹

In this moment of God-given grace, they were moved to make changes. They asked Douglass to help them learn the kind of trust they needed in the desert. And with that, they set off on a new commitment to contemplative prayer and hospitality as daily practices that would allow them to be the followers of Jesus they had long intended to be, people who could love their neighbors without fear for themselves, because they relied on God. In the desert, through God's grace working in their brother Jim and the tradition of prayer given to him and to us, they began to learn how to rely on God's strength. We build that patience by relying on God rather than ourselves, not in abstraction, but in our

¹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *To Baghdad and Beyond: How I Got Born Again in Babylon* (Wipf and Stock, 2005), p. 49.

own bodies. In that trust, Christians of all ages have found a new joy and confidence, a peace that is not the peace the world gives.

Israel's years in the desert made them a people who knew how to enjoy the good gifts God gives. But it also made them people for whom those gifts were the daily exercise and confirmation of their faith in God. Living on manna wasn't just a gift of food, but also a grace that helped them to love God rather than their own fullness. The desert is where God's people eat as they need and rest their security only in God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What sorts of desert times has your congregation endured? What did you discover about yourselves in those times, and what did you discover about God's care?

According to the Gospel of Mark, the Spirit "drives" Jesus into the desert after his baptism, where he was "tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (1:12-13). Even Jesus didn't go into that wilderness on his own initiative, and yet it was in the midst of those dangers that the angels ministered to him. No one wants to be in the desert, but it can be a time of great grace. How do we help (or hinder) each other in discovering those graces? When is comfort helpful and when is it a way of trying to prevent people we love from the hard graces of the desert?

Many Christians have claimed that the source of their trust in God is prayer. Mother Teresa said that in prayer she did not speak, but only looked at Jesus; and he did not speak, but only looked at her. In that time of daily contemplation she found the love that allowed her to be generous and patient in the most desperate of circumstances. In what ways does your prayer life and the prayer life of your congregation nurture trust in God? Is contemplative prayer part of your congregation's life? What other practices do you and your congregation engage in that nurture a deep and abiding trust in God?

Conversation 5 Festivals, or Being Poor and Rich Together

The gift of manna taught people to trust God, but it also taught them to trust each other. When they gathered manna, there was enough for everyone. “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather of it every man of you as much as he can eat; you shall take an omer apiece, according to the number of the persons whom each of you has in his tent.’ And the people of Israel did so; they gathered some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; each gathered according to what he could eat.” (Ex. 16: 18)

In the wilderness, God provided plenty for every day and for every person, and on the day before the Sabbath they could gather twice as much and have sufficient for everyone to take a day off. The fear and mistrust that drive people to hoard were trained out of them, as was the habit they might have learned from the Egyptians of understanding “rest” to mean that some people got time off while others continued to work. For Israel, eating and resting are gifts given by a trustworthy God, and they are gifts given to everyone in the community.

In fact, when God brought Israel out of slavery and into freedom, manna was not the only gift provided. The great gift of those days to Jews of all generations was the gift of the law, the teaching about how to be God’s people. It may sound odd, law as a gift. As we usually think of it, law may be necessary for society, but it is always a limit and a burden. For Jews, though, the law is God’s great gift. Why is that?

There are two parts to that answer: the first is about the purpose of law, generally, and the second is about what specifically God’s law required. In the first place, God’s law teaches Israel how to be happy. As the psalms say it, “Happy the one who . . .” The law is wisdom; it is “the path of life.” The law is training in the skill of living well together before God. Someone who wants to become a singer or baseball player or chef delights in the opportunity to submit to training from an expert; people who want to live well delight in the opportunity to submit to God’s law. They experience that not as a loss of freedom, but as the way to gain the freedom they desire—the freedom to fulfill their talent, their calling, their desire. This law is not opposed to freedom; rather, it shows us what being free people looks like.

True enough, centuries of the painful history of sin teach us that law on its own condemns us: without God’s mercy, our failure would have the last word. But for those who live a life of grace, the law still teaches us what a holy life looks like. It gives us insight into why we need grace and what our lives will come to look like through it.

Of course, not all laws are sources of freedom. A law that forbids people to speak the truth, for example, could not be celebrated in the way God’s law is. The *content* of the law matters. So what is God’s law like?

Most of us are familiar with the Ten Commandments, but Jewish scholars tell us that there are in fact 613 commandments given in the Torah. The books of Leviticus and

Deuteronomy are full of teachings on how God's people are to live together as free people. For example, as mentioned previously, in the land of milk and honey to which God led Israel, feasting was not only permitted but required; one must not neglect to celebrate generously. In fact, Deuteronomy 14 requires that the people take a tenth of their produce and hold a feast with it. A tenth off the top: this is no small feast! It can appear to us not only odd, but dangerous. What would be left to turn into savings, to re-invest? If this is law, then clearly it's a strange kind of law.

More than that, in the two harvest festivals described in Deuteronomy 16:9-15, Israel is told to "rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your manservant and your maidservant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you. . . . You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes." (Dt. 16: 11-12) The celebration is not complete if anyone is left out. Joyous hospitality is not what we do after our needs, present and future, have been tended to; it is the first act for the holder of wealth, written into law and calendar, as well as faith and custom. Likewise, it is not a matter of individual choice: warm hospitality to those in need is built into the political and economic structure of God's people. The law is meant to be a source of joy, because it teaches God's people how to live with each other and with their good God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What does your congregation's current practice of feasting look like? What does this practice "say" about who you are as a congregation? What does it reveal about your understanding of God and God's reign?

The practice of sharing God's gifts joyously with the sojourner and orphan was one of the ways Israel was to be a light to the nations. For Christians, who have been given God's gift of reconciliation, the Lord's Supper is the great feast to be shared among all God's people. Reflect on Paul's words about those who celebrate the Lord's Supper in such a way that God's gifts are enjoyed by some but withheld from others. (1 Cor. 11:17-22)

One of the great challenges to hospitality and loving our neighbors is that for many of us, our neighborhoods, workplaces, and means of transportation limit us from contact with people different from ourselves. How can we have shared festivals with people we do not know? Committing to the neighborhood in which the church meets and learning to love the church's neighbors practically can be a key to growing in Christ. Check out the story of Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, which has wrestled with this challenge for many years: <http://www.inglewoodcc.com/history.html>

Conversation 6 Scarcity and Jubilee

Anyone who has taken a high-school economics course can see a problem with Israel's approach to distributing food. The first principle of the modern discipline of economics is scarcity: there is not enough to satisfy everyone's desires. Humans always want more than they can have, and this insatiable desire is the engine that drives our production and exchange. Maybe for a miraculous period in the desert God provided manna, but that's hardly a plan of action for dealing with our world.

On the face of it, the principle of scarcity is only a statement of the obvious. No matter how much we have, we can imagine wanting more, and even in a mild climate and fertile soil, there are limits to what is produced relative to our ability to consume. The principle need not mean that people will always starve, but it does mean we will always compete with each other for resources, and some of us at least will be disappointed in our desires, if not in our needs.

One Christian economist, noting this problem, has proposed that Christians ought to speak of 'finitude' rather than 'scarcity.' It is true that we need systems of distribution. There is not an unlimited supply of everything a person might want, so we have to have a way to figure out how to spread it around. But finite supplies do not necessarily mean a lack of enough for each or a competition in which some must do without. God's word to Israel was, "If you will keep these laws, there will be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4). Jesus was evidently skeptical about Israel's ability to keep the law, when he said that they would always have the poor among them (Matt 26:11). Israel's land and wealth was, in God's promise, to be plenty for all.

The laws were not so naïve as to hold that no one would ever fall on hard times. But they did hold that when this happened, neighbors were not to take an attitude of "better you than me." For example, if one suffered, the others were to offer interest-free loans and periodically to release debtors from even those debts. "If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut up your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be" (Deut. 15:7-8).

We all know that while adversity can bring people together, it can also tear a community apart, as people compete to save their own necks. Even couples who love each other dearly can break under the pressure of poverty. In the desert with the gift of manna, God quietly trained Israel away from fear and strife, for "he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; each gathered according to what he could eat" (Ex. 16:18). Everyone would have enough, but no one would have a surplus to save or sell. Each person was fed by God's hand, and neither anxiety nor ambition made any sense in this matter. Instead of experiencing the pressure of a limited food source, they learned to be a people together, all beloved by God.

Like the people of that village in France that hosted Jews during the Nazi occupation, Israel is becoming a people who think sharing with each other in times of trouble is the normal thing to do. They trust God and each other because they got used to it in the desert. Such trust opens up a new kind of enjoyment of the goods of the earth: the enjoyment of it as God's gift to all of us together, rather than as a possession I hold to protect me from uncertainty.

The Jubilee year laws have received much attention recently as modeling how God's people should behave in face of the threat of entrenched poverty. The law stipulated that every fifty years, debts would be forgiven and each family would get their ancestral home back. No family would permanently be debilitated by one generation's bad luck or poor work habits. The international Jubilee movement has advocated the release of the world's most impoverished nations from their foreign debt. In many cases, the debt had been contracted by people in power who wasted the loan, and after more than twenty years, the principle had been paid back many times over; however, because of the compounded interest, the nations were no closer to having the debt paid off. What had been paid, moreover, had been earned on the backs of the poorest in those nations, as benefits to them were the first to be cut. As a result of this international Jubilee campaign, some of those debts have been forgiven, though much remains to be done.

Another celebration of Jubilee happened October 21, 2002, when a young man and a group of his friends redistributed \$10,000 he had been awarded by a court after his wrongful arrest. That morning he turned up at the entrance to the New York Stock Exchange and announced a Jubilee. He and his companions began tossing dollar bills into the air and emptying change from their pockets. Thousands of dollars in small bills and coins flooded the street. Homeless people, who had been invited to the event, and traders on their way into work all faced this sudden, prodigal outpouring together, and joined in laughing at the lovely absurdity of such generosity. The moment was contagious— someone not in on the planning went out to buy bagels to give away as well. There is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed, the organizers proclaimed. For an hour, they overcame injustice, not with anger or violence, but through the beauty of their own giving.

This is an interesting example of how Israel's law was intended to function: God's call to Israel was not merely about Israel's prosperity, but about Israel's call to be a light to the nations, a sign to all people of what God's justice looks like, so that all nations of the world would stream toward the light of that city on a hill (Isaiah 2:2-5; 42:5-7; 49:6). Our economic life, our work of doing justice, is to be festive, joyous, an occasion for all people to rejoice together in God's goodness. The loveliness of the example invites everyone who sees it to join in.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

How do assumptions and anxieties about scarcity play out in your own everyday life? In the everyday life of your congregation?

Many of our society's "normal" economic practices and habits are deeply rooted in assumptions about scarcity—the primary one being that we live in a world where there simply isn't enough to go around. Do you share this assumption? What does such an assumption ultimately say about a God who created a world where some people are destined never to have enough?

Do you or your congregation have any "Jubilee" stories to share? If so, share them. If you are unfamiliar with the Jubilee movement for debt forgiveness, see the following:

<http://www.jubileeusa.org/>

<http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk/>

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/adminstm.htm>

The full story of the Wall Street Jubilee is available at http://www.thesimpleway.org/love_dollars/index.html

Conversation 7 The Mind of Christ: Power, Weakness, Solidarity

Christianity is really all about one person, our brother Jesus Christ. The law God gave the Jews was fulfilled in him, as he made God's wisdom present. Whatever it is we do and believe about material wealth, it has to have its root in this person. The principle stated earlier, that our spiritual lives are not somehow really separate from our bodies and the material world, is all the more true in Christian thought on Jesus. He is God incarnate, but not God dressed up in a human outfit, with his real life somehow someplace else. God in Jesus is human, grows and eats and squints in the sun and, of course, dies. Early in Christian theology, the possibility that Jesus had no real body, a notion connected to the same dualism to which the Manicheans fell prey, was rejected. Jesus is human as well as divine, and that means he is flesh all the way through.

His sharing in that condition with us is the fundamental Christian mystery. God is now our family, a blood relation, through the Son's incarnation. Listen to how scripture describes this:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
Who, though he was in the form of God,
Did not regard equality with God
As something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
Taking the form of a slave,
Being born in human likeness,
And being found in human form,
He humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death,
Even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)

This description speaks of the life of the Son as a whole, from the self-emptying of the divine word to the poverty of the young man Jesus in an occupied nation (the form of a slave) to the utter loss of self in a criminal's death. It is the ultimate riches to rags story, and it happens as a deliberate gift of the person's will.

Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century contemplative, wrote that at the moment Adam fell, the Son also fell into human flesh. What she meant was that in God there was no hesitation about whether to pay this price for humanity's redemption. God didn't try to find another way out of this, but immediately, with the kind of love that cannot stand on the sidelines, dove in to save us.

It's an astounding gift, but then it isn't something completely unknown to us. It's a bit like what families do all the time: we take on each other's burdens as our own. Married couples and even close friends know what it's like to leap into trouble out of love for someone else. We go into not-at-all metaphorical debt for each other. The difference, obviously, is that God's leap is inestimably further, and done under no obligation, and made with no hesitation or ulterior motive. The greatest love we have witnessed is an

echo of this far greater divine love. God's leap into our family becomes the truth that Christian marriage points to: God gives all, faithfully and joyously. God becomes weak, bound, hungry, sick, even dead, because God becomes family to us, and makes us God's own family.

This is God's great jubilee. Seeing people dig themselves back into slavery even when they had been set free and given the gift of law to teach them how to live as free and joyous people, God breaks in to declare again the deeper, greater truth of our freedom. We may sell out our heritage, but Jesus proclaims a great year of forgiveness and release: "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord'... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:18-19, 21). God taught Israel to follow this law, and when Israel failed in it, God came to declare it and enact it again.

The trust that Israel learned (and often failed to learn) in God's good care, such that no one should shy away from another's need out of fear of his own loss, is epitomized in the life of Jesus: rather than clinging to security, he claims his place in the family and calls our needs his own. We tend to think of God as infinitely strong, but in Jesus we meet a God who has become weak, to be with us.

Pope John Paul II liked to use the word "solidarity" when he spoke of Christian love. It is "not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is *a firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the *common good*; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are *all* really responsible *for all*" ("On Social Concern," 38; emphasis in the original). As Christ did not count his own well-being apart from that of all humanity, so the mind of Christ is to know our own welfare as bound up in the well-being of every person, and therefore to commit ourselves fully to the life we share. "One's neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her, and for that person's sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for the brethren (cf. 1 John 3:16)" ("On Social Concern," 40).

John Paul II wrote often of the importance of seeing every person as a gift, so that no one—not the sick, children, the poor, the elderly, even the enemy—would be seen merely as a burden or obstacle. He associated this with "solidarity" no doubt in part because it was the name of the Polish labor union that resisted Soviet-style communism. That is, he knew how, when humans commit themselves to caring for each other as persons, they can produce powerful change in a world that sees people as just so much material for building an ideologue's paradise. It was not military power that overcame communist rule in eastern Europe; it was the refusal of ordinary people to stop being faithful to each other.

As Christ has become family to us, he's made us family to each other and called us to be family to each other.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Often we look at the problem of poverty and wish we had more power, more money, more resources to address it. But God's power is made manifest in weakness, which we see most clearly when Jesus empties himself and becomes family to those who are weak. In what ways can our weakness be the place of God's strength and a way for us to grow in the mind of Christ? What examples of this can you offer from your own life and the life of your congregation?

Solidarity is based not in rejecting self-interest, but in realizing how deeply we are bound together, so that the needs of others are also needs for me. Where do you find your own needs connected to those of others? Where do you see the needs of others connected to yours?

How has the Spirit nurtured solidarity in your congregation in the past? How might your congregation be more open to having this habit of solidarity cultivated in your life together?

Conversation 8 **Koinonia and Collections**

When Jesus' Spirit is poured out on the apostles, a familiar set of things begin to happen. His previously timid followers preach boldly to crowds, people come looking for baptism, the sick are healed, and in a confrontation with the powerful, Stephen dies begging forgiveness for his killers. In a nutshell, it's as though Jesus' life was the match that has set the bonfire alight. The one life is now shared among the many.

In the middle of that story in the early chapters of Acts are two passages that have inspired and disturbed Christians through the centuries:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people . And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:44-47)

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as they had need.” (Acts 4:32-36)

Here's where the rubber hits the road: how did the apostles, fresh from Pentecost, run their finance committee?

These passages have inspired religious communities where members practice a life of shared prayer and common ownership, from St. Anthony to the New Monasticism movement. But it would be a mistake to think that this part of the joy of the new community of disciples can be shared by only a few. There is no reason to assume that what these passages describe is an absolute abolition of private property. Of the two specific descriptions we get of how Christians shared their goods, neither one suggests that all Christians were obligated to renounce all their possessions. The first is the very next line in Acts 4: “There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostle's feet.” (Acts 4:36-37) Why would one man selling one field merit comment if in fact everyone had abandoned every possession? And the story of Ananias and Sapphira, at the beginning of chapter 5, condemns not those who retained property, but those who *lied* about how much they were giving.

The evidence of these stories is that the practice of having all things in common, for which the Greek word is *koinonia*, refers to the way Christians did not allow each other

to live in poverty, but cheerfully provided for each other's needs, "not claiming anything as their own." Koinonia is closely linked to the prayers and the breaking of the bread, and the similarity of roots in *common* property and *communion* parallels the way the Greek words work. The sharing of goods and sharing in Christ's body are two aspects of the same reality, the shared life of the community as the body of Christ.

More evidence in the same direction is provided in the New Testament's account of Paul's collection. Paul does not demand or require that each Christian abandon all they have. As Paul puts it, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance." (2 Cor. 8: 13-14) And again, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." (2 Cor. 9: 7-8)

What we see in both Acts and 2 Corinthians is not a legal system or a utopian ideal, but something more like good family life, where people step in to take care of each other. Jesus told them to love one another as he had loved them, and then he sent the Spirit to fill them with that love, which is manifest in their care for each other. Paul considers that generous giving as itself the greatest wealth we can have, since it is a share in the mind of Christ.

Given all we know about what God taught ancient Israel, we might rightly view this sharing by the early church as a kind of Jubilee feast. It's important to note that as Deuteronomy promised that if the people would obey God's law there would be no poor among them (Deut. 15:4), and as Jesus complained of his hypocritical questioners that they would always have the poor among them (Mark 14:7), so here, in the people filled with the Spirit, God's law is obeyed and there are no poor among them (Acts 4:34). The Jubilee Jesus announced when he said he came to bring good news to the poor and proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord has come to pass, through the work of the Spirit.

Though we rarely acknowledge how important it is, this practice persists among us, ecumenically and through the ages: we take up collections. It might strike people as funny to think of our collections as part of this great tradition of Jubilee and koinonia and Paul's collection, but it is no small thing that when we gather to proclaim the good news we also share our wealth. Material sharing is one of scripture's hallmarks of the Spirit's work. It is part of our joyous sharing in Jesus' own life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

How does your congregation take up collections and how is your congregation encouraged to think about it?

In what ways are your congregation's collections like and unlike the sharing of goods in Acts?

What would it mean, practically speaking, for your congregation to agree that there would be "no poor among you"?

Conversation 9 Almsgiving and Gift-giving

Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me.

Giving alms is also an ancient and universal Christian practice, but in recent centuries, charitable giving has come under some sharp scrutiny. Take the old adage, “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for the rest of his life.” The wisdom in that saying is that almsgiving may do no real good for the poor, leaving them insulted and dependent, unable to make their own way. Some go so far as to say that charitable giving encourages the poor to stay dependent. Some critics claim, and with reason, that people who give alms actually want the poor to stay poor because in that way, the wealthy can feel generous without actually risking losing any power over other people. If almsgiving is a key traditional practice of Christians, it is also one laden with temptations to pride and carelessness, resentment and despair.

As mentioned previously, St. Vincent de Paul said that “It is because of our love—and only because of our love—that the poor forgive us the bread we offer them.” The gift can be insulting, it can be a power-play, it can be a mere sop to drive away the poor person or at least to drive away some guilt related to that person. But it can also be a work of mercy, one of the actions Jesus talked about in Matthew 25: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink...” Yes, there are many ways that almsgiving can go wrong, but Jesus’ appeal in this passage remains unmistakable: to refuse to help someone in need is to refuse to recognize Jesus, his joining with us in weakness and poverty.

Nevertheless, giving gifts to those in need is still a hard thing for many of us to get entirely right. One theologian has argued that it is impossible, strictly speaking, to give a gift to a beggar, because that kind of alms is not a real gift. A real gift, he argues, is an invitation into friendship, a way of becoming vulnerable to someone else, not a one-time act of pity. Gift-giving, at its best, is a way two people take a chance on each other, because when it works well, it creates a kind of happy debt between two people. No one *has* to give a gift, but in our gratitude and affection, we like to take turns offering them, surprising each other, and that is what makes them delightful. If I accept a gift, it implies that I may give a gift back and receive another later on, and so on, so that we live continually trading this little uneven and undefined debt between us, as a kind of bond. That’s also why we refuse to receive gifts from people with whom we are angry. We cannot do that with people we cannot trust, for people with whom we give and receive gifts are people with whom we can be vulnerable.

The one-way one-time hand-out, however, leaves one person permanently in debt, without any future relationship of mutual care. The giver may think of this as generosity (“I never asked for anything in return”). But true generosity involves being willing to be seen for who you are: another human, fallible and needy. The great danger of the one-sided alms is that the person who gives it may hide behind it, proud and secure, and untouchable.

But, the same theologian who claims alms are not real gifts also acknowledges that they could *become* real gifts, *if* they are an invitation into friendship. At that point, the beggar ceases to be “beggar” and becomes “Mr. Jenkins” or “Anne,” someone who may also have gifts for me and who can play an active part in my life, instead of just being a prop in my one-person play. Instead of being a metaphorical neighbor, the person becomes a real neighbor, a real person for whom I have to make room in my life. Then true gift giving may be able to happen, because the possibility of mutual need and mutual gift, the possibility of solidarity, has been opened up.

Of course, this also makes almsgiving much more complicated! One young man, Michael Kirwan, wanted to do something for the homeless people he walked past in Washington, DC every night. He started making big jars of soup. He would take the soup to a place near grates where homeless people would sleep in the winter and he’d just set it near them and leave. One night, as he set the jar down, one of the homeless men got up, took the soup, and dumped the entire jar of it onto Kirwan’s head. “What do you think we are, dogs? You just drop off our food and walk away?” The man was demanding that Kirwan be open to those to whom he was giving, and Kirwan got the message. That night set him off on the path that he followed the rest of his life, sharing his home and his life with the people to whom he had once merely given alms, making room for all they had to offer, as friends do for each other.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The writer Flannery O'Connor often depicted God's grace as a swift kick to the human ego, something that shakes people up so they can see themselves as they are. Kirwan's story is like that, as he is invited more deeply into the good news by getting soup dumped on his head. Where have you ever seen this kind of grace at work firsthand?

If being a good gift-giver requires an openness to receiving a return gift, is God a good gift-giver? In what way is God open to our return-gift and vulnerable to our reactions?

Reflect once again on Israel's laws for feasting. It was their confidence in the God who cared for them in the desert and their habits of sharing with each other that allowed them to feast well together. How does our confidence in God and trust in each other help us give gifts well?

Conversation 10 Work as a Gift

You meet a stranger at a party and by way of getting to know her, you ask, “So, what do you do?” Asking about a person’s work is the quickest way we have of understanding who another person is. For most of us the single most time-consuming activity in our lives is the work we do for an income. We literally spend our days becoming managers or mechanics or accountants or teachers, and we depend for our livelihood on other people recognizing us as competent in that job.

How does this then fit into this biblical logic of trust in God and love of one another?

Notice how we tend to think about faith and work: work is about what we earn in an impartial relationship where each side gets what they contracted for. I go to my job and if I do what I was hired to do, I get the pay we agreed on. But my faith is about a free gift I received, unmerited and deeply personal. The two categories don’t seem to overlap at all.

Then consider how the Torah taught God’s people to work: the land is the gift of God and working it is a sign of freedom from slavery, the pleasure of producing and enjoying the fruits of one’s own work. No one is to work on the Sabbath, and every seventh year, the land is to have its own Sabbath. Both the land to be worked and the rest of the people are gifts of God to Israel. Work does not replace God’s gifts. It celebrates and cooperates with them.

In fact, the laws of Sabbath and Jubilee and feasting suggest that Israel was not at all to be a workaholic nation. There is no call to prove oneself worthy by hard work. Proving oneself to be God’s people has much more to do with resting and rejoicing than with work. We must always keep this in mind when we talk about our work. It is not an end in itself and in the scheme of God’s many gifts poured out on us, our work has a modest role. We were not saved to work, nor will our work save us.

Still the work does need doing. Dishes have to be washed, roofs repaired, children taught, bones set, goods transported from one place to another. In other words, we have to take care of each other. Seen in that light, the necessity of work is nothing other than the necessity of love for each other, organized into a social form.

An acquaintance of mine who worked for U-Haul illustrated this for me. He said, “I work for a moving company, sure. And every month we get people whose lives have just been turned upside down by a death or violence in the home or a financial crisis or a job change. I get paid to rent them a trailer, but what I do is take care of them at that moment, being calm and sensible for them, getting rid of one more hassle in their lives and even, sometimes, taking time after work to help get their stuff moved.” His work was not a way of selling his time, but a way of taking care of people. It was about earning a living, but it was also about being a person.

On the other hand, a workplace can make that kind of approach very difficult. Farmworkers in the US have long pointed out that their ability to do their work well, to grow and pick and ship healthful food is tied up in a process that makes them and the land sick and can be dangerous for the health of all of us. Competition to produce food more cheaply leads companies to look for cheaper ingredients and to pressure farmers to provide those at ever lower costs. Pesticides and fertilizers become necessities for farmers to sell in this market, and workers in the fields are pressured both by exposure to those chemicals and by low, sometimes miserable wages and living conditions. In such circumstances, work can hardly be gift—it has been made a cruel trade-off between one's personhood and one's income. Slavery in Egypt was a way for the Jews to stay alive, but that's not what we mean by good work.

Some work will be hard and unpleasant. That's why we count it as work rather than fun. But if work is to be an act of love, then workers need ways to be responsible, healthy, creative participants in that work. A truly profitable business meets needs in a way that allows its workers to become more virtuous people, so that the whole well-being of the community is improved.

This is the vision that inspired Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare movement, when she proposed what became their "economy of communion." Focolare began during World War II and inspired communities of Christians around the world to grow in mutual love and Christian service as well as to participate in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. But in 1991 during a visit to a Focolare community in Brazil, Lubich was horrified by the overwhelming poverty of the favelas, Brazilian shantytowns. Focolare members told her that the poverty far outstripped their generosity, and she made a plea for a new approach. She called on members to start businesses that would provide jobs, but that would exist for the sake of the common good rather than only for their own profit. Members generously contributed their resources to initiate such businesses, and all those who hold stock in the businesses agree that profit will be divided three ways: one third goes to growing the business, so that it will stay sound; one third goes directly to those in need; and one third goes to help start other businesses that will work on the same principles. In their communities all over the world, Focolare is starting up networks of local companies that in this way attempt to link business to solidarity and mutual love.

A perhaps more impressive example is the Mondragon cooperative. Inspired by the ideas of a Catholic priest, Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta, in 1956 a community of Christians in a small town in Spain founded a cooperative business in which workers would be respected and responsible, and in which profit would be re-invested. The family of companies that grew up around these commitments have had ups and downs along with the economy of Spain, but have remained not only competitive, but successful. Mondragon Cooperative Corporation is now the leading industrial group of the Basque country and the seventh largest in Spain.

What is key in both cases is that our problems with work are not problems we face alone. In the 1980s, a lengthy national discussion among Catholics about the morality of building nuclear weapons led one bishop to take a step that might be a model for this kind

of trust. He asked all those in his care to pray that national resources might be turned to use for peace, that national leaders might work toward disarmament. He himself would face pressure and controversy for this leadership, but he was particularly concerned for the consciences of those in the weapons industry. He encouraged them to pray for wisdom regarding their own participation in adding to the enormous national stockpile of nuclear weapons, and he made a pledge: any of them who decided for reasons of conscience to leave that job would receive assistance from the diocese until they could find new work. He wanted the Christians under his care to feel free to act in accord with their consciences, and to do that, he committed the church to taking a financial risk with them. They needed good work and the church needed them to be not only praying members of congregations, but people who treat their work as a serious part of their discipleship. And he knew that they could not face that discernment and its consequences alone.

Offering work as a gift is not merely a question of altering one's attitude toward work, although it is certainly that. It has also been a question of communities of people working together to create ways of honoring that gift.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What opportunities do you have as a congregation to see each other ‘at work’ and to depend on and honor each other’s skills?

As suggested above, our society encourages us to think of our work primarily as a means of providing a stable income, a respectable identity, and a secure future. In light of that cultural pressure, what might it look like for your congregation to encourage its members to see the work they do for income primarily as a function of their discipleship—for example, as a practical way of loving and serving their neighbors?

Can you imagine having a conversation in your congregation about whether and to what extent the work we each do is good work—that is, work which contributes to the overall well-being of the larger community? Can you imagine your congregation supporting people financially for a time who believed they needed to follow their consciences and quit doing work they believed wasn’t good work?

Check out the story of the Economy of Communion. <http://www.edc-online.org/defaultE.htm>

Conversation 11

Plenty and Trust in a World of Mortal Need

Breakfast is one of my favorite moments of the day, homey and quiet. I sip my coffee with a little milk, eat a little bread or cereal, maybe an orange, and read the news. The still sleepiness of my kitchen lets me look from a position of relative comfort into windows on hundreds of other lives in the news. Victims of bombing; an international convention on the economy; the latest senate scandal; movie reviews; the local police blotter; and for fun, a photo of street fashion in Paris. I can stand to see all that pain mixed in with a little gossip, from a safe distance. I am in my early-morning nest.

There's an old Alfred Hitchcock film called *Rear Window* that captures both the pleasure and danger of such a position. The hero, Mr. Jeffries (played by Jimmy Stewart) is temporarily confined to a wheelchair in an apartment that looks out on the windows of several other apartments. He sits in his place and watches his neighbors' lives with amusement and then with growing concern, as he begins to suspect one of them of murder. It's an intriguing mystery, until the horrifying moment when the murderer looks out his window, across the yard, and sees Stewart watching him. Suddenly Stewart's nest of safety is open to that view: the murderer is looking at him. He himself is drawn into the violence he has until then only watched from a distance.

It's a famous psychological trick and it makes for a great (or terrible, depending on your taste) thriller. The problem is that as I eat my quiet breakfast and read the paper, I teeter on the edge of that same moment. I can watch tragedy and comedy from afar, but always at the risk of finding myself involved, for good or ill.

The truth is, of course, that my kitchen is hardly the nest I imagine it to be. My coffee is from Central America or Africa (depending on my mood and pricing at the grocery store); my orange is likely to be from South America, the radio I play assembled in China, the pajamas I have on from the Philippines, the newspaper delivery powered by oil from Venezuela, and so on. It only takes a moment's reflection to find myself, like Jimmy Stewart, no longer an observer, but an unwilling participant in the dramas unfolding so far away.

Practicing our confidence and joy as Christians in our families and congregations and local economies is challenging enough. But our economies aren't just local, and neither are our bonds to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus sent the apostles out to all the world, and driven by the Spirit, they proclaimed good news far and wide. About a third of the world's population is Christian, and the great majority of those are in impoverished nations. In fact, Christianity is growing fastest in some of the poorest parts of the world. Our joy at sharing faith with so many is challenged by our knowledge that some 35,000 people die every day from hunger-related diseases. All of them are children of God and people Christ loves. Many of them are Christian. Those commercials we hate to watch on late-night TV tell the truth—our brothers and sisters around the world die for lack of a few dollars. And we cannot claim we didn't know.

Remember: fear is useless. What is needed is trust. How will we, as people given life to the full, anointed by the Spirit and made family to God, how will we live in a world in which thousands of people die daily simply from the lack of clean water and food?

It is important first to dispel the idea that such poverty is inevitable. The world produces far more than enough calories to feed all its inhabitants. And the money it would take annually to lift every person from extreme poverty is miniscule relative to our wealth. Scholars estimate that \$300 billion dollars annually would be enough to bring everyone in the world up to a minimum income of \$2 per day. The gross national income of the US in late 2006 was almost 12 trillion dollars. If the US partnered with other developed nations, it would only take a little more than 1% of the gross national income from that group to provide the \$300 billion needed. (See Thomas W. Pogge, World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms) The problem is not that we do not have enough, but that we do not manage to distribute it in a way that meets the basic needs of everyone

But didn't Jesus say, "The poor you will always have with you"? As I mentioned earlier, Jesus is referring back to Deuteronomy 15, where Israel is told that if they follow God's laws, there will be no poor among them. His answer then is not that they need not worry themselves about the poor, since their situation is hopeless. His answer is that nothing is stopping those who claim to be concerned from acting, anytime they like. Let's revisit that moment. The woman has just anointed Jesus with a jar of perfume worth three hundred day's wages. At \$6 an hour and 8 hours a day, that \$14,400. That's some bottle of perfume! Understandably, some people watching see this as a waste and argue that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus calls their bluff. If they wanted to meet the needs of the poor, they were always able to do so. God provides what his people need, and blaming poverty on this one bottle of perfume poured out in a prophetic act, marking Jesus as the Anointed, was nothing but hypocrisy.

If miserable poverty is neither God's will nor the inevitable result of a lack of resources, then we have no cause to despair or to hide from our own involvement in world economic patterns that leave so many in poverty. Our call is to be Christ's body, to carry his good news all around the world. It's a big task, but the Spirit invites us with joy to face that task, trusting in God's gifts to lead us one step at a time.

First and last and always, we pray for the grace to be the members of the Body that Christ has made us, and for his Father's kingdom to come. The work of grace is God's work, and if we think we can do it on our own, we are in for a rude awakening. It is our trust in God that lets us face the terrors of poverty with some honesty and hope, and with love for each person.

Second, we remain humble and sensible. It is not my job to tend to every need, but to do what falls to me, as honestly and joyously as I can. Where we fail, we don't despair, and when the needs outstrip our ability, we pray to the master of the harvest to send more workers.

But third, we must take seriously the ancient teaching of our saints. God made the earth to meet the needs of all, and if we cause that not to be so, then we are in sin. Indeed, faced with callous disregard of the poor in his era, St. Basil (c.330-379) told his people that when they refused to share what they had, they were guilty of the deaths of those who starved. We really are all responsible for all. Their suffering is ours, and they are our family. Contributing to the needs of those who suffer is not a nice afterthought; it is essential to our identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, we can be smart about this. Mother Teresa, in addition to being fearlessly generous, was a savvy organizer. The head and heart need not be at odds in these ventures. Consider Heifer International, an organization that uses small gifts of animals to help a few families be self-sufficient, but requires that the families pass the gift on to others as their own animals reproduce. In this way, a whole village can be impacted. Aid can be essential in times of crisis; but policies that allow people to know the joy of good work can be an even greater gift, as they invite people into an active role in our relationships.

But whether we work on aid or changes to systems of trade and work, the most important gift we must ask for and give to each other is mutual love, which casts out fear. Knowing that God is trustworthy, we can become vulnerable to the needs and gifts of others, becoming family to them as Christ has already done. That means we will share not only goods, but also power and troubles; we will have arguments and work through them; we will have to ask for and give forgiveness. And in taking the risk of becoming family with people around the world, we grow in our knowledge that God is trustworthy, even when people let us down.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Revisit the first conversation in this study, the one about anxieties we often have when we start talking about the gospel and possessions. Have your anxieties lessened? Increased? Changed? In what ways? Why?

The world holds enough resources to end extreme poverty (defined as living on less than a dollar a day). Nevertheless, important practical questions remain of *how* to distribute the wealth needed to address extreme poverty. What role might the church around the world play in that task? What role might your congregation play?

Conversation 12

Being Pilgrims Together

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Mt. 6:25-33)

The commandment is, "Do not be anxious." It's not a suggestion; it's a mandate.

And it follows in Matthew's gospel immediately after the claim, "You cannot serve God and mammon." The implication is that those who serve God are not anxious; those who serve mammon are anxious. Anxiety, in this account, is not about whether you have plenty or little, so much as it is a sign by which we can know a person's master. Mammon, the god of wealth, is not trustworthy, and it is therefore no surprise that his servants should be anxious. If they rely on mammon for their wellbeing today, they may very well find him gone tomorrow, and the restless search to store up enough to overcome that fear doesn't bring security, but only more fear. There is never enough, if mammon is what we count on.

But the God of Israel, the God of Jesus is trustworthy. He delivered Israel and brought them food in due season. I sat one day in a black congregation in North Carolina and heard a preacher proclaiming the good news that in forty years of wandering, Israel's shoes did not wear out. They had to wander, and in the desert. Those were hard years of the physical and mental strain of a hostile climate and uncertainty about the future. But day after day, they had manna to eat and their shoes did not wear out. When Jesus taught his followers to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," he wasn't innovating. All of Israel's history with its God was the story of learning to trust that God gives enough. Even when they had arrived in the promised land they had to trust that they could feast every year, that they could invite the poor to share in the feast; that they could lend, even knowing they might not be repaid, when someone was in trouble; that they could forgive debts and redistribute estates so that all God's people could enjoy the land they'd been given. Israel's failures were consistently linked to its trusting in its own strength, which is to say, in its wealth. Mammon is unreliable; God is faithful.

Trust didn't come easy to Israel, and it doesn't come easy to us. The difficulty here is that you cannot learn to trust without taking risks. You cannot stand on the security of

your own resources and practice trusting in God. We only learn trust by practicing it, again and again. After they made it through the desert and came into their land, Israel ended up back in exile, working again on learning to trust in God rather than themselves, and in an important sense, God's people of Israel and the church have remained in exile ever since. We are, thanks be to God, assured of our home, but we are still on pilgrimage toward that home, not yet able to rest in it.

The virtue of the pilgrimage is hope, which knows that a good is promised but that we must work and struggle toward it. We can neither kid ourselves that our difficulties are over nor give up on attaining the full promise. Hope is what keeps us on the road.

But God meets us more than halfway. I worked for a time in a house of hospitality, and again and again we found that our trusting prayers were met with overwhelming response. I prayed for beds when we had no furniture and an hour later a church volunteer called offering to have student volunteers make a hundred bunk beds. (We had a five-bedroom house, so I had to recall the episode in which God tells a complaining Israel that he'll give them quail until it comes out their noses.) I prayed about a family who were eating eggs faster than I could stock them, and an acquaintance stopped by with four dozen eggs. We decided to rely on donations rather than subscriptions, and the next day, a thousand dollar check arrived, unsolicited.

In the words of the old spiritual, though, we had to "wade in the water." In Joshua 3, after the years in the wilderness, God tells the people to cross the Jordan, and "when the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be stopped from flowing and the waters coming down from above shall stand in a heap." It's a fine promise, but the priests had to wade out into the water before it would be fulfilled. Had they waited on the shore, nothing would have happened. The waters part when in obedience to God's call we wade in.

"Stepping out in faith" is not mere risk-taking, as though Christians enjoyed the thrill of uncertainty. The point is not to be rash. The point is to be faithful together, and to know that the God who calls us also makes it possible for us to follow. In the words of rock star-activist Bono (who, as a young man, lived in a Christian community that practiced *koinonia*), when we take risks to love the poor, "God will watch our backs." (On the Move) Does that mean everything will turn out as we wanted? Not likely. We are still on pilgrimage, and it is our hope—not our own strength and certainly not our ability to control the future—which keeps us going.

As in the laws of Israel and in the teachings of Jesus, love for our brothers and sisters calls us to share in each other's burdens and graces, in discernment, in our festivals and our jobs and our prayers. And that loving work is our freedom.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What do you think is the most important thing that you have learned or been reminded of through our study together? Why is this important to you?

What questions or issues remain most unresolved for you as we complete this study?

In response to what we have learned through our time together, what joyful and hopeful steps might we take into these waters ahead of us?