



## Faith by the Wayside

Prov. 22:1-9, 22-23; Ps. 125; Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-10

Generosity seems at variance with the American Dream and its focus on getting ahead of the pack. We don't like to think of it that way, but our national ambition is anything but generous in nature. Perhaps this is in part why some are crying foul in public debate forums like the town hall meetings on health care reform. I have heard many voices of individuals up in arms over concerns of socialism—a reportedly great evil plague of government interference over individuality. The concerns do not seem to be so much a conflict between democracy and socialism, however, but the conflict between individual wealth and social wealth—selfish greed versus generosity toward others.

That is not to say we don't value generosity. We take great pride in holding up as heroes those who go out of their way to help others in crisis. We prize and value their generosity. Yet it seems always to be the generosity of others we prize, instead of our own. If we truly held generosity in high esteem, it would change the way we live, interact, and manage our resources.

I have led several funeral services for saints esteemed by family and friends for their selfless and generous spirits. I have seen the wistful expressions of the faces of family as they spoke about a loved one's values as those of a time long past. I have seen tears swell in recounting selfless actions of a deceased loved one with a seeming confusion over the why of a generous spirit. I have listened to the awe expressed over the heroic selflessness of such loved one. I have also noticed reticence to follow the example of those loved ones valued for this very same generosity.

We seemingly value selflessness and generosity in others, but only at an arm's length. The generous and selfless stand out from the crowd, because their values are different than our own. They have found and lived by a creed we have not learned, understood, or accepted. They live according to a pattern of life we have left behind as outmoded, outdated, and unwieldy—at odds with the values of our own generation—at odds with the American Dream.

Solomon's Proverbs in today's lectionary reading are seemingly as confused on the issue as we are—at least on the surface. There seems to be a struggle here between understanding wealth as God's blessing and understanding wealth as a responsibility to care for those with less. The passage speaks initially as an honorable name being greater than wealth. It then turns to speak of wealth as *Yahweh's* blessing on those who are humble and respect *Yahweh*. Next, it speaks of the responsibility the wealthy have toward the poor and God's concern and care for the poor. Wealth may indeed be a blessing, but it is a blessing tied to responsibility for the welfare of others. Wealth is not designed by God as blessing for the individual or family. It is rather the opportunity to be God's provision for those cast by the wayside of life. It is responsibility with a warning: God will despoil those who gain wealth and power on the backs of the poor.

We really don't like hearing that part of the gospel. We are not simply responsible for our own welfare. We are responsible for the welfare of others—the poor, the struggling, the dispossessed, and the hurting. Rather than heed the directions of God, we would prefer the message of the larger society—at least as long as things are going well for us. We have taken to heart the words of *Invictus*—"I am the captain of my ship, I am the master of my fate!"—the mantra that we are in control of our welfare and financial security. Perhaps that is why Katrina and 9/11 had such emotional impact on our society.

They were events over which we had little control. Our investments in a security infrastructure showed themselves as inadequate. The lives of too many were torn apart at no fault of their own. We saw that personal initiative and industry is insufficient to guarantee wealth and security.

As a nation, we are guilty from the standpoint of James' words. That in itself is not surprising, for the values of our society are not nearly as Christian as many would like to believe. Our nation was built not upon a Biblical ethic or the concerns of Christ Jesus. It was rather built on the concerns of a rugged individualism, freedom from the control of others, and defiance in the face of a burdensome taxation. Our core values were not love of neighbor and a spirit of generosity, but the accumulation of wealth through personal initiative.

James' words were a sharp critique to the underpinnings of Pharisaic Judaism. He had the audacity to declare that if one were guilty of one part of the law, one was guilty of the law as a whole. In the common tradition, one needed only to fulfill little more than half of the commandments to get by with God. James followed Jesus in calling for much more commitment to God. He says that violating one part of the law makes us outlaws before God. If I were pulled over for speeding would my wearing a seatbelt and staying in my lane override cause for my getting a ticket? Why then, should I believe that God's design for my life be unimportant at those points I find uncomfortable or incompatible with my personal aims and desires?

The Jews acted as if God did not have enough grace to go around. They acted like there was only so much of God's provision, and definitely not enough for them to share with others. The rich made a show of generosity in the Temple, but ignored the poor en route to the synagogue. The people did not trust God to provide for them with sufficiency. They looked for ways to skirt God's commandments and instructions for living. They classified people as to their worthy and used generosity only as a means of controlling others. Those on the outside of their definitions of worth, they ignored completely.

While Jesus taught that their system of qualifying and neglecting people was improper, he then went out of his way to demonstrate the reach of God's grace and provision. He left Judea and sought out a foreigner—a Gentile woman—in the region of Tyre. She asked for grace. He gave her the standard response of the traditional Jew. She answered that even the dogs ate scraps from under the table. Then Jesus did something to amaze his disciples. He healed her daughter saying that her words were exactly the statement of faith he was seeking. There was enough grace and provision in God's stores to meet the needs of all—even the ever hungry dogs under the table. He didn't stop there. Jesus sought out a man in the Greek world of the ten cities region, healing even one with no voice at all.

Jesus talked about faith and God's sufficiency. He didn't just talk about it, however, and get on with personal ambitions. He lived and modeled the faith to which he called us. He called his disciples to live beyond the comfortable limits of life established by the religious norms of their society. He called them to put faith to the test. He called them to be generous with others along the manner and example of God's generosity. He challenged them to look beyond the surface confusion of Solomon's proverbs on wealth, to understand the responsibility that comes with God's blessings. We are challenged to be generous to a fault, beginning with those along the wayside of life. This is, after all, where faith has its true beginning. It is when faith overthrows the mantra of society for the gospel of Christ that it begins to live. Until then, it is faith that we cast by the wayside as we continue following lesser ambitions.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*