

Sunday, October 19, 2014

As news has unfolded about the Ebola virus gaining ground in West Africa, I, like you, have continued in prayer for those who are affected. As it caught a plane across the Atlantic, I have watched with, perhaps, something MORE than interest and care for those affected. Suddenly, I, too, began to feel affected. I'm not talking about myself coming down with symptoms of Ebola; I'm talking about coming down with symptoms of fear. Fear makes us do a lot of things, doesn't it? It leads us to react, to hoard, to protect; to close borders, to stay inside, to resist trusting others, to avoid helping others. Even in the smallest ways, I can sense it; my pulse is rising.

Then, this week, came the news that supposedly Houston's mayor had declared war on clergy and was demanding that sermons be turned over to the courts. And my reaction was like that of a lot of people: WHAT? They can't do that! WE have free speech! The state cannot control us, we must rebel! FREEDOM!

Fear makes us do a lot of things, doesn't it? It leads us to react, to protect, to resist trusting others. Now, obviously Ebola and Freedom of speech and religion are serious issues of great concern--no doubt. But as it turns out, I am not currently at risk for Ebola, and the mayor is probably not interested in my sermons. A fearful reaction to anything often leads us to miss a few steps--steps like gathering facts, asking questions, listening carefully, seeking God's guidance. When fear enters in, prudence, thoughtfulness, and care for others tend to flee out the back door, or jump out of the window. When fear enters in, it's time to protect ME.

In the story of Joseph, found in Genesis, Pharaoh hires Joseph to manage Egypt's crop monopoly. You see, Pharaoh has learned from his dream that a famine is coming, scarcity is coming, and so when there isn't enough to go around, it's best to grab up all that you can--protect yourselves. So Joseph is in charge--as the famine begins to set in, and the peasants need food, they go to Joseph. And Joseph, on Pharaoh's behalf, says, "Ok, what's your collateral?" So they give up their land in order to get food; and the next year they come back, and Joseph says, "What's your collateral?", and they give up their cattle in order to get food. And the third year, when they come back again because there is still no

food in the land, they have no collateral left; and so they offer Pharaoh themselves. And that is how the Hebrews become slaves in Egypt. As Walter Brueggemann says, "It's an economic transaction." And it grows out of people with much, who fear not having enough...and keep it all for themselves. When fear enters in, it's time to protect ME.

Paul offers an alternative--once again, like gratitude last week, we find a new narrative. In our text today, Paul is in the midst of his own Stewardship Campaign. He is writing to the Christians in Corinth to raise money for the Christian Church in Jerusalem, a very poor church. And in his effort to convince the Corinthians to give their money to those whom they have never met, Paul presents a very different kind of economics. This, my friends, is the original "Freakonomics." "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." For us, the rich one--the richest one of all--became poor. He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.

I tell you what, here's what gets me. I love to spiritualize this emptying bit--this bit about Christ becoming poor. I love to make it about humility and meekness and all of these lovely things--and it is. But I didn't really believe that this could be about money until I myself saw the widow give her last two coins. Until I saw ones whom I would call poor give with almost unreasonable generosity. Until I sat at a table and was fed, insistently fed, fed a second helping by a woman who could scarcely afford to feed her children, I did not know what it meant to be rich, and to be poor. Generosity. A self-emptying kind of giving. Paul challenges us to believe that such generosity, such selflessness, is the call of those who wish to follow Christ.

Nancy Rockwell hits it on the head when she says "The generosity Jesus urges is not an accumulative good-deed-doing, to bank on earning you a ticket to heaven, but a rush of self-forgetting, a joyfully celebrative generosity that empties its purse without worries of a harsh future."

A rush of self-forgetting. Without worries. Generosity looks in the face of fear, and says, "No." In fact, generosity turns away from fear altogether, forgetting that the world has said I should be afraid. Generosity is too preoccupied with its call to the one in need. When fear clenches our fists, generosity, like gratitude,

loosens our grip. it is fear that unleashes the two-year-old in each of us who gathers up everything we have into our arms and says "Mine." Generosity opens our arms up; generosity looks to another and says, "I want more for you, even if it means wanting less for me."

By its very nature, Generosity is sacrificial, and it is born out of trust in the one who has given us all we will ever need. When Jesus talks in the Gospels about giving to the poor, to those in need, he makes few, if any, claims about what good it will do for the poor. Instead, Jesus claims that it is the givers who will be better off, not because we will earn another jewel in our crown, but because generosity will save our souls from being eaten alive by fear.

Fear tells us that we need more, that we must hold on to what we have because one day there may not be enough. Generosity is focused on the one who is already in need. Fear says give something from whatever is left over--take care of yourself first. Generosity invites us to make adjustments in our lives in order to be free to make adjustments in someone else's life.

A couple of months ago, Pastor Hannah and I sat down with Professor Michael Emerson at Rice University. Dr. Emerson is a well-respected sociologist, teaching and doing research through the Kinder Institute there at Rice. Some of you probably remember Dr. Emerson, as, back in the early 2000s, he did some research on multi-cultural faith communities, and some of his research focused on this very church. He told me, even as we met, that he has long admired this congregation, where diversity is ingrained into the fabric of our congregation, and into the very values that shape our faith. But on this day in August, we were talking about Dr. Emerson's newest research. He's studying two different kinds of cities: market cities and people cities. Here's what he says:

Market cities privilege the market, believing that the purpose of a city is to generate economic growth, lure businesses, increase gross domestic product, create wealth. If they succeed, they lead to vast wealth for some, and also incredible swaths of poverty and neglected neighborhoods. Disinvesting in neighborhoods is built into the system of market cities, for when neighborhoods become so depressed, they can then be bought up by developers at cheap prices and generate huge profits through gentrification. Does this sound vaguely familiar? Remember what happened in Egypt, with Pharaoh, and Joseph, and

their crop monopoly? Remember what happened with the 2-year-old, holding onto her toys?

People cities, on the other hand, privilege their citizens, believing that the purpose of a city is to create a high quality of life, equality among people, safety and enjoyment with each other. They also focus on sustainable development because they believe the high quality of life they seek is for current and future citizens.

In the book he is writing about this, Dr. Emerson uses Copenhagen and Houston as examples of these two kinds of cities, market cities and people cities. Guess which kind Houston is?

Dr. Emerson is as convicted as he is convicting about who we are as a city. He says it is not sufficient for us to try to put a band-aid on the hurt and destruction that market cities create. He says "We need to work for a new kind of city, one that says we are for people first, we will make our decisions based on people first, we will spend our money based on people first, we will build based on people first, we will educate based on people first, and we will teach, pray, and serve based on people first." You see, Dr. Emerson knows Jesus.

He knows that Jesus does not call anyone to live by the principle of increasing our net worth. In Jesus' book, friends, your net worth is higher than you could ever imagine, and it has nothing to do with your bank account. In fact, when Jesus looks at the sum of my savings accounts and my investments and my debts he doesn't see my net worth, he sees my net potential to bless somebody else--to tell, or teach, or show someone else that their net worth and mine are both found deep within the heart of the God who created us and is determined not to do life without us, so much so that he gave up everything, emptied himself and took on the form of a slave, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--there is a God who became poor, that I might be rich in grace.

Westbury Church, the call comes to each of us as individuals, and to all of us as a Church body, to allow ourselves to be shaped, and reshaped by the self-emptying generosity of Jesus--to be shaped and reshaped to want more for others, even though it means less for ourselves--shaped and reshaped to give in a way that affects how we live, from our closet and our car, to our neighborhood, our

schools, our city, to give in a way that changes how we live--because the love of Christ has changed us.*

Thanks be to God.

*Adapted words from Ann Voskamp

**A good deal of the material on Joseph and immediately following is adapted from Walter Brueggemann in this article: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>

Summary: We are taught to live in fear of the future. Generosity calls us to trust God with the future and offer our gifts today, emptying ourselves in self-sacrifice for others, as Jesus did for us.