Proper 23, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Date:
Sun, 10/14/2012 (All day)
Church and Location:  St. Peter’s Episcopal, Port Royal, VA

Sermon, Proper 23, Year B

Imagine that we have traveled back in time to the late 1700’s, and that we all have been invited out to dinner.

The setting sun suffuses the dining room with a brilliant golden light as our host invites us to sit down at his elegantly appointed table.

The chef has prepared the vegetables from the extensive gardens with a distinctly continental flair. He has roasted the succulent duck in a delicate sauce made of oranges and honey. A fine wine accompanies each course. The French cuisine is like nothing we have eaten elsewhere in Virginia.

After dinner and dessert, we enjoy a final glass of wine to promote our good health.

This meal has been like no other. The brilliant conversation of our host has delighted us, and we have been amazed by the fact that the food which Mr. Jefferson brings to the table and passes to us has appeared soundlessly on a revolving door with shelves. When we have finished with a course, he places our used dishes on these same shelves, turns the door and the dishes vanish. And as we finish each bottle of wine, Mr. Jefferson opens a panel next to the fireplace, places the empty bottle inside, and seconds later, a fresh bottle of wine appears.

The abundance of Mr. Jefferson’s table seems magical and effortless. In fact, all of Monticello seems magical to us—a house set on a high hill, with its finest and most noble parts available to us.

We do not know that this lovely house sits over a long tunnel through which the slaves hurry with course after course of food prepared by the slaves in the kitchen at one end of the tunnel.

After dinner, we stroll on the Monticello lawn in the twilight, but we cannot see Mulberry Row, the Monticello slave quarter, where the most favored of Jefferson’s over one hundred slaves live. One of us, though, has read about the slave quarter in the Richmond Enquirer. A visitor, a close friend of Jefferson’s, has been allowed to see Mulberry Row. In the article, she has said that the “cabins would appear poor and uncomfortable” only to people of “northern feelings.”

Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of this country, is an enigma. This man wrote the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights--that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

And yet, by the 1790’s, Jefferson had become completely silent on the subject of slavery, although he had once denounced the slave trade as “an assemblage of horrors,” a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberties.”
And some people took note of this silence about slavery. Moncure Conway, an abolitionist, born not far from here in Falmouth, Stafford County, Virginia, had this to say about Thomas Jefferson as the conflict in the country brewed over the issue of slavery in the years before the Civil War-- “Never did a man achieve more fame for what he did not do.”

In fact, in 1792, in a letter to President Washington, Jefferson noted that he was making a four percent profit every year on the birth of black children. Henry Wieneck, in his article, "Master of Monticello," in the October issue of *The Smithsonian*, notes that Jefferson’s “plantation was producing inexhaustible human assets and that the percentage was predictable.”

In fact, as Wieneck goes on to point out, economists who have studied the institution of slavery in the United States have found that enslaved black people were the second most valuable capital asset in the United States, right behind the land itself.

As our scriptures today make clear, the oppression of other human beings for personal gain is a sin that has always run rampant in human beings.

God sent the prophet Amos almost three thousand years ago now to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. The rich were enjoying new found wealth and a time of national ease and prosperity as old tribal family systems of land ownership broke down.

And in this breakdown, a few became wealthy landowners who increased their wealth at the expense of the poor in the society. Amos says that these people turned justice to wormwood and brought righteousness to the ground. They abhorred those who sat in judgment. They trampled on the poor by taking levies of grain from them. They pushed aside the needy in the gate.

Nothing much had changed eight centuries later when a wealthy man, sure of his own goodness, came running up to Jesus and knelt before him and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus reminded this man of the commandments.

“You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud: Honor your father and your mother.”

New Testament scholar Joel Marcus points out that Jesus states the tenth commandment as “Do not defraud,” rather than as “Do not covet,” which is the way we would expect to hear this commandment.

Marcus makes the suggestion that Jesus is pointing out that landowners of his time were also exploiting the poor for their own gain.

The rich man who kneels before Jesus, and who looks up to Jesus for approval, belongs to this class of landowners.

But as Jesus looks at this man, Jesus can see what this rich man cannot see. This wealthy man has knowingly, or unknowingly, defrauded and oppressed the poor on his way to becoming wealthy.
This rich man has lived in a state of selective blindness. He can see all of the ways in which he has kept the commandments, but he is blind to the fact that part of his good fortune has been at the expense of others.

Jesus, looking into the heart of this man, loves him, and so Jesus says to him, “You lack one thing: go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

And this rich man, having been so excited, having expected affirmation, feels these words of Jesus pierce his soul.

Jesus knows and has judged the thoughts and intentions of the rich man’s heart; thoughts and intentions that the rich man had kept hidden even from himself. Jesus knows everything about the man, even the things that he had avoided seeing about himself. In spite of the fact that he is wearing a well made cloak of expensive material, the rich man might as well be naked and bare as Jesus looks into his very being.

This story makes me uncomfortable, and I’m betting it makes you uncomfortable too. Deep down inside, I’m afraid that if I found myself in front of Jesus on my knees like the rich man was, expecting the Jesus stamp of approval, and instead heard Jesus say to me what he said to the rich man, I too would get up from my knees in a state of shock, and would turn and walk away feeling disgruntled and unhappy.

Like the rich man, I don’t want to examine or question my financial well being--because my immediate assumption about myself is that I earn, protect, and spend my money justly. I’d be hard pressed to believe that Jesus would find my relationship to money and possessions getting in the way of following him.

And this story also makes me uncomfortable because it challenges me to see someone I deeply admire, Thomas Jefferson, as a flawed human being whose wealth and good fortune was not just the result of his incredible ingenuity and intelligence and hard work, but was also the result of his exploitation of human beings, the slaves who played a major part in making his many accomplishments possible. I’m saddened that Jefferson turned a blind eye to this oppression of other human beings based on his own self-interest.

Jefferson admired Jesus as a great ethical teacher. In fact, Jefferson put together what he called The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, which we know as the Jefferson Bible. In his later years, Jefferson would read the King James Bible before bed. He took a razor and carefully extracted those passages which he believed could be used to help others understand, in his words, “the sublime and benevolent code of morals” that Jesus laid out in his life and in his teaching. Jefferson found this exercise to be intensely personal and private.

So I got curious as I was working on this sermon. I wondered what Jefferson thought of the story of the rich man. I wondered what Jefferson would make of the fact that Jesus asked the rich man to go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

Apparently, this story was uncomfortable and challenging for Jefferson as well. I searched carefully through the Jefferson Bible, and I discovered that Jefferson did include some other stories that
Jesus told about money, but guess what—the story of the rich man is completely missing in Jefferson’s Bible.

And that’s our temptation—to edit this story out of our Bibles as Jefferson did, to walk away from Jesus as the rich man did, to ignore seemingly crazy prophets like Amos as the people of the northern kingdom of Israel did, and to continue to enjoy, without question, our wealth.

So when I leave here today, I’m going to resist the temptation to shut my Bible and to leave the rich man caught between its covers.

Instead, I’m taking the rich man home with me.

He and I are going to spend some time in prayer kneeling in front of Jesus this week.

In this prayer time, I’m going to try to see beyond the blind spots that I’ve created for myself because of my possessions. I’m going to honestly examine the ways in which my relationship to money might be oppressive to others.

As I pray, I’m going to listen for what Jesus would tell me to go and do about my wealth so that I can correct those things around money and possessions that continue to keep me separated from God, and that keep me from helping the people around me.

I am going to strive for justice in the ways that I get and spend money.

When the rich man exits the room, I’m going to resist the temptation to jump up and leave with him.

I’m going to try to follow Jesus instead of walking away from him.

And this is my prayer for all of us.

Amen.

References
