

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Hartford, Connecticut

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 20, Year C September 23, 2007

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13

The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick

PROPERTY: FETISH OR VEHICLE OF JUSTICE?

Last week Barbara spoke about the difference between Kingdom values and the values of the market place. This morning I'd like to expand her trenchant observations, in the light of this morning's Scripture readings, by reflecting on how kingdom values and prevailing economic/political values sometimes conflict around the issue of property and how it can be used responsibly by Christians.

One of the basic assumptions of our time is that the private possession or ownership of property is almost as essential to our well-being as life itself. In fact, for many, the fullness of life depends on owning property. The basic governing principles of America are rooted in a legal system designed to protect private property and the right of individuals, not the society, to use that property as they see fit. Government, according to the founding fathers, is established primarily to preserve individuals' right to the free exercise of their private property.

Politically there may be nothing wrong where this understanding of government is concerned. But this morning's readings from Scripture suggest a somewhat different and initially puzzling way of looking at the ownership of property when it is seen from God's point of view. And that different way is potentially very destabilizing of many of the assumptions we make about our responsibilities to other people if we are trying to live by kingdom values in a world that is not yet the Kingdom.

The first sign we have that something may be amiss in how we should regard our ownership of property is in the strange, disturbing parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke. The manager is charged by his master with squandering his property and is asked to give an account of his actions. The manager reports that he has reduced what is owed his master by each of the master's debtors. The manager's action is, however, clearly dishonest. But the master, much to our surprise, *commends* the dishonest manager because he has acted *shrewdly*. Our natural temptation, of course, is to identify the master with God, but that leaves us with the puzzling conclusion that God is commending dishonest use of someone else's property.

This bafflement, I think, is a clue that we need to rethink what ownership and property are all about in Jesus' parable of the kingdom. Clearly the manager's actions make sense if we want to live successfully in the world as what Jesus calls the children of this age. If shrewdness in the ways of the world is the ultimate moral criterion then the manager has done well. But the children of light are not nearly as shrewd or calculating, and what Jesus may be saying is that the politically shrewd way of viewing property is fundamentally askew. If that's true then what values are we to live by?

Enter at this point the counter-intuitive values about property that appear consistently throughout the Bible. While never condemning the goodness of material things (since God created the material world and called it good and later incarnated himself into as a fully material being like the rest of us), the Bible

never elevates material property to an unqualified good in itself, to a fetish. Instead, the goods of the material world are consistently seen as *instrumental means* to the fullness of life, and, until all can share in them to the degree necessary for fulfillment, they are never to be held without qualification for the sake of private possession in and for itself.

If Jesus shared his property, his material body, with the world by giving it up on a cross so that all might be redeemed, then it made sense for the early Church to insist on having its members give up all their material wealth as long as there were material needs that had to be met in the community. As the book of Acts reminds us, in the earliest Church, because the whole group was of one heart and soul, “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” And 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, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Now this practice of the earliest faith community was not, as we know, (except in monastic communities) continued in the life of the Church or society once Christianity had been made a state religion and had entered upon its ambiguous history of alliances with the secular powers that be. But the notion of the *common good*, the subordination of one’s own private interest to the needs of the larger community, never entirely died out among Christians, though it was more often articulated in theory than carried out in practice. Ambrose, one of the great early bishops, put it succinctly: the words “mine” and “thine” are chilly words which introduce wars into the world and they should be eliminated from the Church, because wars are almost always about retaining or getting back property.

This vision was hard to sustain and many would argue that we would have no market-based economy if we had continued to practice what the early Christians thought of as the kingdom values of common, not private, property. This is not the place to explore all the dimensions of this contrast, but at the very least we have to remind ourselves that kingdom values do not always sit comfortably with private property values especially when the latter are not overridden from time to time when needed by common good values, that is, when people are hurting and in need.

But there is one way we might let those kingdom values influence our current practice without necessarily overturning the whole market-based system on which so much of our economic life clearly relies. In the words of Jeremiah this morning we hear the questions: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”

Surely, in today’s American society those questions are as relevant now as they were then. Why *has* the health of the poor in our country not been restored? Part of the answer lies in the failure of all of us to consider making our private property (that is, our wealth subject to taxation or philanthropy) available to provide adequate quality health care to all the people of our national community. We often still treat health care as something that ought to be subject *only* to market forces, offered for profit to those who can afford it. We have not yet gotten to the point of considering it as a basic right to which all are entitled and for which all must contribute from what they own in order that the medical needs of all will be taken care of.

Now I’m not arguing for any particular plan for the provision of this essential good (and we will hear about many as the political campaigns heat up), but if we are truly to live by kingdom values we have to subordinate (not necessarily eliminate) our absolutist claims to private ownership of property to the pressing needs of those whose fundamental well-being depends on fair and equitable access to the goods

of medical care. The physical, biological, and psychological health care needs of persons are at least as constitutive of who we are as are our spiritual needs. But it is only if we put claims of private property into the service of providing health care to all our citizens that we can claim we are taking kingdom values seriously.

That is a hard challenge for many us, some of whom make our living by working in the private sector for companies whose profits depend in part on limiting access to health care on the part of those with pre-existing conditions or who can't afford the premiums and even those in the middle class who often stand one paycheck away from having their access to health care cut off. There may well be ways to combine the benefits of profit-based private insurance with the moral and social obligation to provide equitable health care to all from the common good, and ways in which we can utilize the virtues of the market system, but in that debate, we as Christians must be guided first and foremost by kingdom values, and those values will always place the moral principle of the common ownership of property ahead of private ownership when human well-being is at stake.

At the very least we should not make a fetish of private property, because in the end all property is in the service of the Kingdom, never an end in itself. Our salvation does not depend on how much material property we've accumulated but instead upon God's grace, which was costly to him but a free benefit to us. And if we are the recipients of divine grace our obligation is to give fully of what we have been given, without calculating its effects on our bank accounts, just as God gave of himself in his son Jesus Christ without counting the cost. God's grace must not be received cheaply: it should be received gratefully and with an expansive willingness to give all of what we have to those in need until all are made whole by a gracious and life-healing God.

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