

TRAVELING LIGHT

Jesus says some things that I think are very hard to grasp in the culture in which we live. One of those things is the statement, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth and don't be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink." I think most of us spend most of our lives laying up treasures on earth and being anxious about what we're going to eat and drink and wear. One of the great paradoxes, I think, is logically it would follow that the more we have, the more generous we can be. But it rarely works out that way. All the statistical studies I've ever seen about giving (there are individual exceptions, but as a general rule), have revealed that people in the lower income brackets consistently give a higher percentage of what they have to the church and to charity than do people in the higher income brackets. As if somehow, when we become wealthier, instead of becoming more grateful, we become more greedy. I wonder if that's why Jesus warned us not to lay up treasures on earth.

It's interesting the story of the Hebrews in the wilderness. They were so thrilled to be liberated from slavery in Egypt and yet two or three weeks later, when they got into the Sinai desert and they ran out of food and water, they went to Moses and said it would have been better to remain slaves in Egypt than to come out into the wilderness and die. It was out there in the wilderness that the Hebrew people really learned for the first time what it means to trust God, one day at a time. Somebody has said that it only took four weeks to get the Hebrews out of Egypt but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the Hebrews. It took 40 years for them to learn how to trust God. We have those wonderful stories about the manna and the quail and the water that sprung from the flinty rock in the wilderness. You couldn't save up any of that food because it would spoil, so every morning for 40 years, the Hebrew people had to trust that God was going to see them through, one day at a time. It's interesting to me that it was precisely at the moment when the Hebrews were going to leave the wilderness to enter the promised land that God began to worry about them. He said I'm going to give you this land of milk and honey and silver and gold and cattle and crops, but I'm worried about what's going to happen to you when you get all of those goodies. I'm worried that you'll forget how to trust me. I'm worried that you'll get puffed up in your hearts and say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand got me this wealth." And said the Lord, "If you ever get to that point you will surely perish." And sure enough, that is exactly what happened and the Hebrews were carried out once again to slavery in exile in Babylon. I wonder why it is that the more we are materially blessed, instead of becoming more generous, we tend to become more greedy.

I'm a child of the Depression and World War II. I was just a small child during the 1930s and I was lucky that my father was employed throughout the Depression. I grew up in what I call a "no frills family." We had all of the necessities, but no extras and it was a very happy childhood. But I remember the testimonies of many adults during the Depression about how hard it was. People who said that they were dirt poor back then. They lived in a shack with a dirt floor and often went to bed hungry. It was very hard. But they all realized that everyone around them was dirt poor and that they were going to have to find their way through this Depression together and find their way out of it together. In the midst of that wilderness experience, in the midst of that poverty, there was a tremendous sense of solidarity. Everyone was in it together and they needed to find their way out of it together. It was that mentality of solidarity that produced legislation that exists to this day like Social Security and Medicare which was for all of us. But then, after World War II, we had just come out of a depression, but everybody seemed to understand why we had to fight the war. We had to stop Adolph Hitler. Everybody sacrificed. All of the able-bodied young men were drafted into the war, not just working-class young people. The sons of the rich fought and died beside the sons of the poor. Joseph Kennedy, Jr., the older brother of John F. Kennedy died in the war. All of our baseball stars went off to war: Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio. When all of the men went off to war, all of the women took the men's places in the factories. Those of you have grey heads and bald heads probably remember that marvelous poster of Rosie the Riveter and the women who came in and made the tanks and the planes. The older women populated the USO or hospitality centers all over the country to care for the soldiers when they were on leave. Everybody sacrificed. We accepted wage controls, price controls, rationing of sugar and gasoline. A family of four was entitled to one pound of butter a month and everybody accepted that readily. In addition to paying higher taxes to pay for the war, people bought war bonds. Even us little kids, we'd take our quarter or dime to school and each week we'd get stamps that we'd put in a book and when we got \$18.75 in that book, we got a war bond which seven years later would be worth \$25. Boy Scouts would scour the neighborhoods reclaiming all of the used newspapers for the war effort. Everybody sacrificed. My other memory of that period was that for most parents, the most important thing that they could do in their lives was to make sure that their children would have a future in this promising society. So that their kids would get a college education, parents would work extra jobs, work overtime, do whatever they had to do, they'd scrimp and save because what seemed to matter back then was us and the future, particularly the future of our children.

As a child of World War II, I feel very strange in America today. I'll leave it to those of you who are wiser than I am as to whether it is a good idea or a bad idea that we're fighting a war in Iraq. But the question I would pose as a grandfather to both those of you who think it's a good idea and those of you who think it's a bad idea, is why aren't we paying for it? Why is it that the only people who are sacrificing, that I can see, are the young men and women who are going over there and risking their lives? The rest of us aren't sacrificing anything. We're adding the entire cost of the war to the national debt, presumably to be paid by our children and grandchildren. We're passing the entire bill for this war to them. The opposite of what we did in World War II. Yet in World War II, we had much less and now we have much more. But we've become so much greedier that we can't pay for this war because it would interfere with our pursuit of our afflu-

ent lifestyles. I have 12 grandchildren and I don't know how to explain that to them. Instead of us and the future, all that seems to matter today is me and now.

I've come in my old age to believe that it's the constraints of life that make gratitude possible, not the abundance of life. Because again and again, I've seen people and communities that have suffered incredibly who express such incredible gratitude. God has never blessed materially any society in history the way that God has blessed us in the last half century. Why aren't we grateful? I find people who have so much and yet still feel sorry for themselves, their marriages are not good, their relationships with their kids are not good, their life lacks meaning, yet they've got materially all you could want. What's wrong with this picture?

I don't usually expect to be spiritually moved by the op ed page in *The New York Times*, but it happened once, on July 25, 1985. A young Jewish woman had a little essay on the op ed page, she later went on to become a rabbi, by the way, in the reformed tradition. This was a young woman who had suffered and had seen suffering. The title of her little essay was "On Being Grateful: It's Life's Constraints That Make it Possible." She writes beautifully. I'm just going to share with you part of her essay.

"I had a spine disease in my late teens and my early 20s. And I suppose you could say that it pruned me back. No one particularly knew about my pain except me and my boyfriend who used to sleep next to my body cast. At night, because of the pain, I cried myself to sleep. With a feeling that was like searching for a small window along a vast wall. Eventually deep into the night I would find that window and would crawl through onto what felt like a very narrow shelf. Sleep. After I got well again, I still woke up in the middle of every night, because I was used to it. I expected to feel the pain and finding it gone, I'd fall back to sleep relieved. In time, though, it became the relief itself that work me. A gratitude so sharp that it felt almost physical. It's hard to say how relief about something specific evolves into gratitude as a general stance toward life. But that's what often happens and that's what happened to me. I'll wake, and I have for years now, overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude in the middle of the night. It's like a sixth sense, like waking to the smell of smoke in the house or to the sound of a child's cry. It's a reckless feeling as unbidden as tears. Nothing specific is its object, although there are, of course, big things to be grateful for like family and work and health and the security of a lawful country. Then there are the little things to be grateful for like the sound of an orchestra warming up or flowers that pop up in places where they were never planted, or the vertical line in the center of the Holland Tunnel that says New Jersey/New York. These things in their prodigality move me. I lie in bed sometimes not with an urge to pray but rather with the feeling that I am a prayer. Gratitude, it seems after all, is the scar left me by my illness and I wake to run my fingers along its seam. Once, many years ago, I witnessed an expression of gratitude the likes of which I've never seen elsewhere. I was sleeping in the sofa bed in the living room of my boyfriend's

parent's house in Teaneck, New Jersey. I witnessed a performance of gratitude that was unbelievable. It was the middle of the night and I was up with my own back pain when the light flashed on in the upstairs hall and John's father came padding down into the living room. Oblivious of me, he went into the kitchen, cut himself a slab of rye bread with a butcher knife, then stood with that slice of bread in the dining room under the street shadows. "Schleb," he said, tossing the bread in the air. "Brot," he held the bread against his pajama pocket. "Pan," he shook it. "Lechem," he kissed it. "Bread," he took a bite. This he did over and over, saying the word bread in more languages that I could imagine existed. Thrusting and hugging and shaking and kissing and biting and exclaiming, until finally he stood in the room empty-fisted. Then he burped roomily and went upstairs back to bed. I think of that night a lot, especially when I'm up by myself at three in the morning. I think, what did I know about that man? That he loved his wife? Yes. His children? Checked on his kids too often in their rooms. Changed the oil in his car every 1,000 miles. Kept unnecessary dry goods in his basement; his family used to laugh at him. He seemed, sometimes, on an ordinary morning, almost stunned by the fierceness of his happiness. He was, it now seems clear to me, exhausted by his blessings; in a sense, afraid of them. He was a Holocaust survivor, Johnny's dad, and the contrast woke him in the night."

She goes on ...

"When I was a kid, I laughed at somebody too. At two people, actually, my grandmothers."

I love this phrase ...

"My childhood was one of grinding wealth. Once on a radio call-in show, seeking the best answer to the question, 'What would you like to be reincarnated as?' a friend of mine won the prize by stating, 'My reality, the only daughter of a Jewish radiologist.' But my grandmothers, we lived with one of them, my grandmothers were spartan and severe. Nana used to follow us up to our rooms after dinner with a handful of whatever she had picked out of the garbage can, a little carrot top or a heel of a hotdog, or maybe an apple peel with some white left on the inside. She'd hold that carrot top under the lamp on my desk, cut off a little orange-brown coin and flip it into her mouth. 'Anavara,' she'd say, 'It's a sin to waste.' She'd repeat this performance in each of my brother's rooms, then retire to her own room for the night. My other grandmother would not accept gifts. 'I have everything,' she'd taken to saying, probably while she was still starving in Russia under the czar. If you gave her a book, she'd give it back. 'I already have a book,' she'd say. But as I think back on these two women from the vantage point of my own adulthood, this is what I know. There was nothing they wanted on this planet that they didn't already have and there was nothing they had that they didn't want."

I think that image of the Holocaust survivor celebrating with a slice of bread at 3:00 in the morning is etched in my soul. It's the constraints in life that make gratitude possible. I have one other illustration to share with you this morning to make the same point. This comes from a Canadian pastor in Calgary. In 2001 he went over to the Sudan, you know about the genocide that's been going on there. He went to see it in person and he returned home just before Easter. He was thinking about his Easter sermon and this is what he says.

“Our congregation is in middle-class secure Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I have just returned from the Sudan on Wednesday after hearing horrendous stories about the slaughter of innocent people. As part of a delegation of church leaders, we were investigating these stories about villages near the oil fields that were being razed and civilians of all ages being massacred. The Talisman Oil Company, which is headquartered in Calgary, was denying that these things were happening. The stories were true. In one case, we sat in a circle in the bush, hearing the detailed account of the fate of one such village. Taking the lead from the paramount chief, the other chiefs told of helicopter gun ships swooping down on their village, fire-bombing their homes, and shooting the villagers as they fled. One of us in the circle asked him how many were killed. The paramount chief said, ‘We don’t think in numbers.’ Instead, the people named all of the people who were killed, grandmothers, children, parents. They represented each name with a stick or a stone with they placed in the middle of our circle. We watched and we were stunned. With tears in our eyes we watched the dignified process and these dignified faces. I wondered how could I preach to a congregation of secure, oil-friendly people after witnessing such pain inflicted to extract oil in a faraway place. But the refugee story tellers had not finished telling their story by just naming the dead. After further conversation, the surviving villagers straightened their backs and began to sing. A glorious sound filled the air. Again, we were stunned into silence and again we wept. These southern Sudanese people would not be defeated and would not be intimidated. Their songs rang not with defiance, but with genuine hope. So I had my sermon after all and on Easter Sunday I told that story of courage and beauty. In the midst of fear and uncertainty and the horror, because it is, after all, what the story of Easter is all about.”

Let us pray.