

1) I never hear this story without thinking of Carol Duseja:

- Short of stature, solid in build, soft of voice, matter of fact in manner, her eyes in a perpetual twinkle. Carol was a high powered legal and financial professional—
also the highly competent and faithful Junior Warden of the parish I was serving part time. Always planning ahead, always seeing the big picture, always getting things lined up for action. Carol was a life long Episcopalian, knew the liturgy and the lectionary like the back of her hand.
- I had just preached on the story of the rich man; she came up after the service. I thought she was gonna say “good sermon,” but she said something entirely else:
Have you noticed, said she—eyes all atwinkle, that when time rolls around for the annual stewardship drive, the lessons in the lectionary are mostly about money?
No! I gasped, truly shocked. *They lectionary makers wouldn't do such a thing!*
Check it out! She replied. I did. She was right.
- Suddenly I had this vision of the lectionary creators as a shadow committee, a mere front for a giant fund raising outfit that was surreptitiously cranking up stewardship campaigns under the cover of Scripture lessons.
(I'd had several bad experiences with fund raisers—both in and out of church).
- My dis-ease mounted when I went behind the lectionary to the Gospels themselves. And there was Jesus talking about tangible assets all over the place. He talks much more talk about money than he ever talks about sex.
(It makes one wonder if all the shouting some religious types do about sex serves for them as a convenient distraction from what Jesus is really more concerned about—but I digress.)
- I suddenly had this vision of Jesus as the consummate charitable fund raiser. Having just preached on the story of the rich man, I wondered if the ultimate stewardship campaign strategy of Jesus might be the direct approach:
A brochure with a graphic picture of the grieving rich man, and a bold caption:
Give generously! Don't be like the rich man, or you'll be sorry
That, fantasy, of course, said more about my projections than it did about Mark's Jesus. The picture Mark paints of the rich man is graphic, but not nearly so simple.

2) Things have been tense around Jesus for the past few weeks—he's been sounding shrill:

- Harsh words about lopping off hands and feet
- Stern pronouncements about divorce
- Dire predictions about the soul state of the wealthy—camels and needle's eyes and such
- And all this in the context of *I'm going to the cross, and you have to lose your life to gain your life if you have any intention of being identified with me.*
- *The first shall be last and the last shall be first* -- whatever that means.

Understandably, this sort of language sets off shock waves of reaction:

- From the disciples, as they start to skirmish about who is the greatest.
- From critics, who pose a question about divorce to trip Jesus up and break his stride.
- From a wealthy man who shows up out of nowhere,

and wants to know about eternal life.

The squabble about greatness, the challenge about divorce, and the earnest question about eternal life—these seem like they have nothing in common.

But they do, Carol Duseja was right, they are all fundamentally questions of economics:

- “Who is the greatest?”—Who can I get ahead of?
- “What’s the absolute minimum standard for divorce?”—What can I get away with?
- “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”—How can I get all life has to give?

If you put them just that way all these questions about “getting” sound crass, greedy—

Like Bernie Madoff, like the credit default swap merchants—those who have decimated our 401k’s.

But these questions about “what can I get” don’t have to be heard that way, and by his responses, Jesus shows that he takes them very seriously.

These three questions are, in economic terms, critical questions of identity and meaning.

- Who can I get ahead of?—Community life is not possible without hierarchies.
- What can I get away with?—Social life is not possible without boundaries.
- How can I get all life has to give?—Resource planning is a game of craps without a clear sense of what in life is ultimate and enduring.

- 3) What concerns Jesus, in each question—and what generates his sharp responses, is how those questions are cast. He cannot answer them (at least not in the way they are framed) and still remain true to his own integrity and his sense of mission.

All these questions are important.

The problem is that each focuses on comparing, contesting, and calculating—at the expense of connecting.

Comparisons, calculations, even contests, all have their place—they are means to the end of making connections.

When comparing, contesting, and calculating become ends in themselves, however, they undermine the possibility of developing and sustaining deep and abiding connections.

What Jesus is addressing, in these three questions, in short, is a tale of two economies.

What does that mean?

- 4) When I think of “the economy,” what first comes to mind is complex systems of commodity and currency exchange—far more complex than my brain can comprehend.

But the Greek roots of the word economy are —*eikos*—household, and *nomos*—order

An economy is the ordering of a household, a community—

An economy is a way of forging and fostering connections:

Connections among the members who live within the household or the community

And connections with neighbors who live on the other side of the gate.

How do we shape connections that nurture and sustain all in the house—weak and strong.

How do we build and maintain connections so that strangers become neighbors, not aliens?

How do we shape an economy—an ordering of a hospitable household?

Calculation, comparison, even contesting have a critical role to play in that—

as long as we remember that that questions about what we can “get” are but means to the end of making connections.

When we *do* remember—there is the hope at aliens can become neighbors.

(Whatever your take on this week’s announcement about awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama; that deep yearning for connection is surely behind the decision.)

When we *don’t* remember—well, why don’t I just intone the phrase “health care reform”.

5) Jesus, while honoring his questioners, is, in fact, issuing a challenge regarding economic policy—
and that is *all* about *money*, and its *not* about money *at all*.

It's about what kind of world we create as we allocate resources:

A kingdom of God economy, or an economy of business as usual.

The bottom line is this: *How does our use of currency make or break connections?*

Complex question, to say the least.

On this one point, however, Jesus is quite clear:

Creating a Kingdom of God economy is totally impossible if

Who can I get ahead of?

What can I get away with?

How can I get all life has to give?

are the primary questions driving the debate.

5) We see this clearly in the interchange Jesus has with Peter after the rich man staggers off---

“Jesus, Jesus, we already did what you told the rich man to do—So what do WE get?

“What you get, for your currency investment,” says Jesus, “is connections—

households, families, and the necessary living spaces for their thriving.

And you also get the pushback, the persecutions that inevitably come

when God's concern for the values of householding run headlong into attempts—

often greedy, but often just fearful—to get and hold onto all there is

with as few boundaries and limits as possible.”

6) Jesus is plying that sharp, sword-edged discernment the author of Hebrews talks about.

If all you can think about is who is on top, he tells his disciples,

you don't even have a household anymore.

When you climb over people you cut them off—

that's like lopping off an arm or leg—theirs, and yours.

If all you can think about is how to end a marriage relationship,

there will soon be no relationships, no connections left to sustain you.

(To say nothing of what divorce does in communities where, as in the time of Jesus,
women have precious little protection.)

If all you can think about is how to hedge your bets for eternal life,

by being a squeaky clean law abiding citizen,

then you really don't have a clear sense of what living in God's Household entails.

7) It is interesting to compare today's sorrowing rich man with poor old Job.

Both begin as wealthy, law abiding citizens.

One loses his wealth and despairs, the other is asked to give up his wealth and despairs.

But there is an instructive difference between the two men.

Job despairs not so much because he loses his wealth,

but because he loses his family, his friends, his connections.

He doesn't tip into total despair until his friends, trying to make sense out of tragedy,

keep on trying to force him to admit that he is a sinner—when he isn't.

Then—no surprise, Job feels himself totally cut off, totally without connection.

His friends don't stand with him, they turn on him,

His household abandons him, and Job can't find God—well, that's no surprise, either.

The sad surprise for the rich man is the shocking discovery
that, for all his commandment keeping, he values his money,
more than he values the household of God.
His currency, his means of making connections, has become his sad, tragic end.

On the other side of his dark night of the soul, God does appear to Job,
God shushes his most unhelpful friends, and gives him family once again.

So I'm hoping that sooner or later, the words of Jesus get through to the other rich man—
that Jesus connects with him, connects with Peter, connects with me—
and helps us all to see that how we use our assets makes a difference.

- 8) So I come back to the process that Carol Duseja kicked off in me.
Yes, stewardship campaigns are occasionally manipulative.
But I wonder if I might not have been using my legitimate concern as a convenient excuse.
I wonder if what Carol was doing (whether she knew it or not)—
her twinkling eyes a sharp discerning sword—
I wonder if Carol was placing me right in front of Jesus, right alongside the rich man.

Like that rich man, I want eternal life—I long for connection;
but that is inextricably connected with questions of currency.
What might it mean for me, not just to calculate how much I think I can afford to pledge,
but to consider how I need to invest in community connection,
in order to follow Jesus along a trajectory
toward the kingdom, the household, the economy of God—
an economy that puts first what others put last.