

OCCUPY THANKSGIVING:

ON ADEQUACY, ABUNDANCE AND EXCESS

Preface

How might the Occupy encampments of all those rag-tag characters this season resemble the plight of those starving and destitute pilgrims on what we all learned in grade school was "The Story of the First Thanksgiving?" And, what might the gospel tradition of our Christian faith have to say to us, and to our nation, about sharing the necessities of life, a spirit of generosity that is the harvest of abundance, and the impoverishment that results from our foolish greed? It's not just about the 99% any more than it is about the 1%. In the disequilibrium that defines this moment in time, how do we *all* reconstitute a life-affirming balance between those *needs* and *wants* with which we all struggle? This late-November commentary engages the reader in just such a conversation.

Bygone Thanksgivings

Thanksgiving just might be my favorite holiday. The menu for the feast doesn't require a lot of guesswork, and I can still lure my grown kids to return home for what they still believe is the best turkey stuffing and pecan pie on the planet. But more so, when I'm standing ankle deep in fallen leaves, I'm reminded how late autumn holds that waning sense of dissipation; of what has come and gone, with the anticipation of harsher days to come. Time to batten down the hatches, take stock of what we've got, and give thanks for what remains.

For many years in parish ministry we'd always begin the liturgical observance by cranking up the same old traditional hymn,

*Come, ye thankful, people come
Raise the song of harvest home
All is safely gathered in
'ere the winter storms begin.
God, our Maker, doth provide
For our wants to be supplied ... etc.*

And the appointed gospel reading was always from Matthew (6:25), where Jesus presumably assures us not to worry about needs at least – if not our wants -- since God knows them all, and God will surely provide; especially since we're worth far more to the good Lord than the lilies of the field, or those scrappy sparrows of the air, who seem to be doing just fine themselves.

It's one of those quaint scriptures where biblical scholars suggest the preoccupation of the peasant class' need to fret about the bare

necessities of daily life were *consuming distractions* from the political, even apocalyptic, crises that were the consequences of the gross inequities of those who had more than enough (abundance or excess), and those whose basic needs went unmet (inadequacy). Sound familiar?

As such, this Thanksgiving we're presently more keenly aware than ever that the disparity between those "*wants to be supplied*" and those *needs*. The results may be 99% of the public observing this national holiday who may be more worried than ever about their needs, not just their wants.

An old colleague of mine had his own annual tradition of rising from the table at the conclusion of the Thanksgiving feast, preparing one more complete serving of everything, getting in his car and driving down to the other side of town. He'd stop when he found the first homeless person, then sit down on the curb beside them and keep his new companion company as he/she enjoyed the meal.

In contrast this Thanksgiving, thousands of fellow citizens will deliberately *choose* to occupy the streets and spend their Thanksgiving holiday in makeshift encampments. Their disconcerting witness stands as stark testimony to the disequilibrium of excess that has reached ludicrous proportions. Among them will actually even be a few multi-millionaires holding signs that read, "We stand with the 99%," and "Tax Me More."

Congress' so-called Super Committee -- created out of the utter failure of our society's democratic process to find a way to otherwise serve the common good -- failed to do our job for us and decide which needs and wants we will retain, and which we'll go without. This non-solution did not simply usurp the

responsibility of our elected officials to govern. It deluded some into presuming there's a way around the dilemma and challenge *we all have* to figure out: 1) how we will provide for what we need for the common good; 2) when is enough *enough*; and 3) when has our self-indulgence, willful pride and sheer avarice has reached the point of self-destructive folly.

These Days

*You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometimes you just might find
You get what you need.*

Rolling Stones, 1968

Early on in the Occupy-SF version of what has become a nationwide movement, Germaine and I stopped by the milling crowd gathered outside the Federal Reserve building on Market Street one Saturday in October.

There was a carnival-like atmosphere, reminiscent of those sit-in demonstrations I remembered from the sixties. A makeshift band of instruments blared live music, providing an upbeat tempo for the chanting crowds; while the array of handmade signs stood in silent testimony to their exercise of free speech. Each time a car would pass by honking its horn, the crowd would roar, with the

assumption it was all meant as support and encouragement.

One man stood stark naked on the curb as the traffic sped past. Stripped of absolutely everything in this world but his manly prowess that was displayed for all to see, any words scrawled on any sign would have been rather redundant. Oblivious, a few feet away a child sat on the sidewalk. In his lap, a sign of his own read, "Will I have to move to China when I grow up to find a job?" I wondered to myself, does he even know where China is, along with a third of his total current indebtedness?



The Ninety-Niners

Who are these people? One might take a quick glance into the dustbin of history and say they're the modern day equivalent of the peasant population storming the palace walls. In some ways, it is a reactionary phenomenon

as predictable as any revolution, where the disproportionate number of marginalized, disenfranchised, and dispossessed reaches critical mass.

But 99% of anything includes a lot. So too, the Occupy crowd consists of such a diverse swath of the country's citizenry that any attempt to pigeonhole the bunch as fringe weirdos, entitlement malcontents, stooges of some socialist plot, etc., is either misguided, disingenuous, or both. But one thing is clear, as evident in all the attempts to deal with this spreading movement in all the traditional ways. Civic leaders and traditional institutions are placed in untenable situations where the irreconcilable realities of what has been brewing for a long time have now reached the boiling point. Resorting to tear gas and pepper spray by those in positions of power, authority and responsibility who are not to blame for the pervasive frayed and tattered condition in which our social fabric finds itself won't work. And this includes the religious institutions as well.

In Lower Manhattan, where the Occupy movement had its birth, historic Trinity Church stands at the corner of Broadway and Wall Street; the gateway to what has not only been the American icon of the golden age of free-market capitalism, but more recently corporate greed and corruption, as well.

Where once money changers sat outside the Temple in biblical times -- exchanging Roman coin for shekels at exorbitantly profitable rates so the faithful could pay the required temple tax with the only currency deemed acceptable - - a house of worship that retains within its walls the gospel traditions of Jesus from Nazareth now stands in awkward witness; confronted with its commitment to its own faith tradition, as much as the traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange a stones throw away.

Because the church is also located one block south of Zucotti Park, it faces the dilemma how best to respond to not just the crowds, but the movement's deeper message, as well. Some meeting space has evidently been provided for some of the protesters, as well as some restrooms. But Trinity also owns a large open space next to nearby Duarte Square, a half-acre city park. In fact, the church owns vast amounts of Manhattan real estate; so much so

that some liken its holdings and operations to that of a large corporation.

So when the City's police moved in and cleared Zucotti park earlier this week, and the Occupy organizers attempted to negotiate use of the church's unused space nearby, they were denied. When protesters attempted to move onto church property anyway, police in riot gear moved in and made arrests.

Caught in a seeming no-win situation now, the church could have -- and may have -- seen this coming. Kay Merrweather, 34, an artist on the Lower East Side, has been a church volunteer distributing food for a while now. During the financial crisis several years ago, when banks were receiving bailouts and financial executives continued receiving multimillion-dollar bonuses, the church often ran out of food before the long lines of working poor were fed. "The bankers were getting all of these millions," Merrweather said. "And we didn't have enough."

We've all heard and read the recent Census Bureau's report indicating record poverty in America. One in six Americans live below the poverty line, an all time record; a figure that includes 20% of America's children. Nearly fifty million have no health insurance, the most in twenty years. Furthermore, median income declined 2.3% from 2009 and is 7% below 1999 levels. This is the human face of our nation's family this Thanksgiving holiday.

Where once the "49-ers" fled to the hills to pan for gold, today's "99-ers" --as they've come to be dubbed -- have rushed into the streets with empty pockets and little promise of hidden treasure. But in response to all those exasperated critics who demand to know what their agenda is, what they expect to accomplish, and why they don't get more organized, it may be helpful to consider they are no less disorganized than Washington is dysfunctional. As one headline characterized the movement that defies definition: "Countless Grievances, One Thread: We're Angry"

Earlier this year we witnessed the "Arab Spring" that swept through across an entire

region on the other side of the world. What shall call this new cultural contagion of our own? "The Winter of our Discontent?"

The One-Percenters

In 2007, *Wall Street Journal* writer Robert Frank gave us the book the *Richistan*. In it he introduced the reader to a new class of wealthy individuals who were spending differently than traditional blue-blood millionaires. He described life in an insulated world of wealth he called *Richistan*, where self-indulgence exceeded the imagination, and conspicuous consumption was the goal.

Less than five years later, in his latest book, *The High-Beta Rich: How the Manic Wealthy Will Take Us to the Next Boom, Bubble, and Bust*, Frank argues the spending binges of the top 1% are "the most unstable force in the economy." In many cases, they've lost their fortunes, and taken average Americans along with them.

But even among the 1% crowd, there is certainly a broad range of stories of the rich and famous, and differing points of view. On a three-day West Coast swing in late September, President Obama participated in an event hosted by the social networking website LinkedIn, in Mountain View. The President was asked to pick an audience member for a question. It turned out to be Douglas Edwards, a former Google executive who became a millionaire when the company went public in 2004.

To the 100%: Watch Out

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But Jesus said to him, "Mister, who appointed me your judge or arbiter?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Guard against greed in all its forms; after all, possessions, even in abundance, don't guarantee someone life."

Then he told them a parable: "There was a rich man whose fields produced a bumper crop. "What do I do now?" he asked himself, "since I don't have any place to store my crops. I know!" he said, "I'll tear down my barns and build larger ones so I can store all my grain and my goods. Then I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty put away for years to come. Take it easy, eat, drink, enjoy yourself.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded back from you. All this stuff you've collected – whose will it be now?" That's the way it is with those who save up for themselves, but aren't rich where God is concerned. [Luke 12:13-21]

"I'm unemployed by choice," Mr. Edwards told the president. "My question is, would you please raise my taxes?"

This is not the first time we've heard this cry rise from a few among the top tier ranks of the 1%. Warren Buffett's well-publicized call in a New York Times editorial entitled, "Stop Coddling the Super-Rich" advocated the same idea.

More recently, members of a group calling itself Patriotic Millionaires for Fiscal Strength have lobbied Congress for higher taxes on the rich. In response to lobbyist Grover Norquist's suggestion those who wished could simply make a donation to the Treasury, the Patriotic Millionaires reply pointed out the government was not a charity, but the means by which the nation of, by and for the people worked collectively for the common good. In addition, many multi-millionaires have joined The Giving Pledge, promising to give most of their wealth to philanthropy.

In contrast to the excessively self-indulgent inhabitants of *Richistan*, are these bright, successful people just crazy, guilt-ridden or simply know very well what the rest of us are collectively thinking to ourselves: that they could be stripped of the vast majority of their assets and still be living in the lap of luxury?

Or do they share the *same* dilemma we all face when it comes to figuring out what we need, what we want, and the consequences of having more than we could ever need or want? Are we *all* part of *another* demographic known as "The 100%?"

The Jesus of Luke's gospel warns, "Watch out! Guard against greed in all forms; after all, possessions, even in abundance, don't guarantee someone life."

While this line is generally agreed by biblical scholars to be the interpretation of Luke's early Christian community of believers to the more-likely authentic parable that follows about the rich man who builds bigger barns to hoard more of his abundance than he needs, the larger context for this passage is telling. Jesus is asked to arbitrate an inheritance between two brothers, which he refuses; as if to suggest *each of us* must determine – from all we might receive – how to divide up whatever we've got.

That is, the *dilemma* of wrestling with the question of how to distinguish between what is sufficient, what is more than enough, and what is obscenely excessive is something with which we all risk the opportunity of being endowed. It's almost like something in our gene pool, part of our inheritance, what makes us human. There's a life lesson we might *all* do well to all undertake at some point in our lives. Lest the reader think I'm merely pointing an accusatory finger elsewhere, here's a personal case in point:

Watching Out

Soon after my elderly father died, my mother was ready to clear out the old man's things. My two siblings and I gathered to help her. The clothes would be donated. The theological library of a bygone era would be donated, as well, if we could find a place to accept them. The old vestments – including the cope and miter symbolizing an Episcopal ecclesiastical hierarchy that had hung unworn in garment bags for years gathering dust – would be donated to the costume shop of the local repertory theater. Make of that what you will.

Then my mother opens the jewelry box on the dresser. "Here's Dad's watch," my mother says. "Either of you boys need a watch?"

I remember that watch, I think to myself. It's a nice watch, a *Gerard Perregaux*. It was the

watch my father brought back from a trip to Switzerland when I was just a boy in 1957. It's the watch I'd see my father wind each morning, before slapping it around his wrist, and then rush off for another consuming day's work of ministry.

I look at the watch on my own wrist. I'd bought it for fifty bucks more than a dozen years before, and worn it every day since. I'd replaced the strap and battery numerous times. The gold tone finish on the case was mostly worn off, and the watch face was all scratched. It'd taken a lickin' and kept on tickin'. It kept perfect time, and looked like crap.

"Sure, I'll take it," I say to my mother, as I stash my old Pulsar in my pocket, and strap on the nice Swiss timepiece.

Next my mother asks, "Which one of you boys could use these?" First was Dad's silver oil stock, which holds the chrism used to anoint the newly baptized and the dying. The second was his solid gold pectoral cross, which held a sparkling diamond embedded in the center, placed directly over the sculpted image of a chalice. Finally, there was the humongous bishop's ring with the large amethyst, in which the seal of the diocese he once shepherded for a quarter century was carved.

I was still doing embedded in the pastoral thick of parish ministry, while my older brother, the firstborn and namesake, was now a bishop himself. So Mom's question was a no brainer.

Then my mother says, "Now what about Dad's *good* watch?" It's an 18-karat gold beauty that was once given to him by the widow of a wealthy Midwest industrialist who'd served as a faithful churchman in my father's diocese. Apparently the tycoon had three of them; but now didn't need any obviously, since he himself had long since passed into the eternity of time.

I think to myself, "Self, I have a watch." In fact, now I already have two watches. But then I also think to myself, my brother says he doesn't care, and that's a *really* nice one. So

what the heck, Johnny boy gets this gem of a watch.”

“But be careful,” my mother whispers, “it’s worth a fortune.”

Hardly hearing her warning, I shove the second watch in my pocket, and strap on the newest one. It’s huge. It’s quiet heavy. It’s also not running.

“Oh, you have to wind it,” my mother says. Wind it? I’d almost forgotten how convenient today’s cheap timepieces are. But after winding it, and winding it, it still doesn’t want to keep time accurately. So there I am, with a watch in each pocket and one on my wrist that doesn’t work. So I say to myself, “Self, I’ll just get it repaired.”

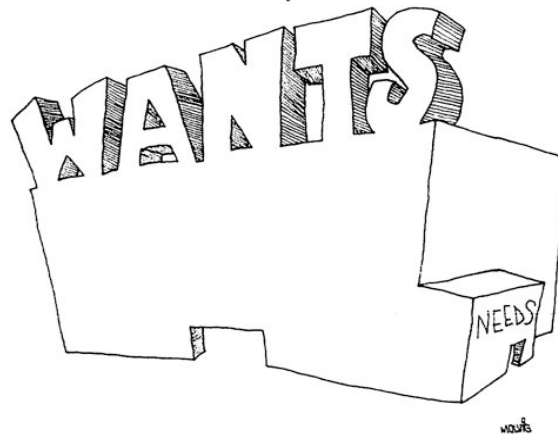
As it turns out, it’s such a fancy watch there’s only one place in the entire Bay Area that’s authorized to work on this brand. So I trudge off to the watch repair shop, located on the eleventh floor of a high-rise office building near Union Square in the City. Six weeks pass, and I return to pick it up. It’s working now. It’s beautiful. And the cost to repair it ends up being more than all the other watches I’ve ever bought in my entire lifetime combined.

So I say to myself, “Self, now that I own something of such value I should probably have it insured against theft or loss.” So I call Harry, my insurance agent, to ask how much it’ll cost to add this one item to my homeowner’s policy. He gives me a ballpark figure, but he also tells me the insurance company will want a professional appraisal first.

As it turns out, I now own such a special watch there’s only one place in the entire Bay Area that’s knowledgeable enough to appraise its value. So I drive to this jewelry store in Marin County, leave it for them to examine, and return the following week. As it turns out, the appraisal costs as much as the purchase price of the cheap watch I bought a dozen years earlier. But it pales in comparison to the value of my new watch. In fact, it’s worth so much I’m now afraid to risk even wearing it.

So I say to myself, “Self, what shall I do? Perhaps I should rent a safe deposit box and stash my fancy watch there? That way I’ll relieve myself of the worry of losing something so valuable; especially since I’ve already spent a fortune to repair it, appraise it and insure it!”

The only question left is how much it was going to cost me to store the most valuable thing I own; and for which I essentially have no practical use.



New Yorker cartoon, January 14, 2008

Bigger Barns

We all know the old adage, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer has never been truer than it is today. There’s even a new term that’s been coined for it, known as “breakaway wealth.” We’ve all heard the jaw-dropping stats, while we simultaneously allow our ears to be tickled with the old dream about a land of abundant opportunity; driven by the notion bigger barns filled with more crap we don’t need is the economic recovery we all need. Just ask the inhabitants of *Richistan*.

But if you take a closer look at this completely unrealistic scenario, it’s the illusory dream of an inverted pyramid with 99% presumably at the top. It is what has been dubbed the “un-economy” by Stewart Wallis of the New Economics Institute. In a land where a significant number of our neighbors can’t afford to keep the barns they’ve got, it is the nightmarish reality that has come to pass, revealing this economic model has proven itself to be *un-fair*, *un-stable* and *un-sustainable*.

In a land where a significant number of our neighbors can't afford to keep the barns they've got, it is the nightmarish reality that has come to pass, revealing this economic model has proven itself to be un-fair, un-stable and un-sustainable.

Hence, the other old adage, money can't buy happiness, is equally true. Just look at the rich fool in the gospel story, and watch out. Be careful the accumulation of material goods which exceeds bountiful abundance to the point of excess.

And excess, I'd say, is the hoarding of more than we need, out of fear we won't have enough. But instead of assuring us of an abundant life, it leads to the deadness of a life lived in the hollow canyons of scarcity, where there is never enough.

"Being rich doesn't make you happy. Of course, happiness and well-being are connected to a modicum of economic security that we all need. But "enough is enough" is proven to be a better guide to a happy life than the maxim "greed is good." The logic and metrics of a manic consumer economy are that you are never *supposed* to be satisfied with what you have, but that you always demand *more*. That endless striving and never-ending desire are *not* making people happy, but rather highly pressured into a lifestyle of constant stress." (Quoted from a recent commentary by Jim Wallis)

At University College London, Michael Marmot has studied the effects of stress on those who have been most directly affected by all the recent economic upheaval, and the relationship between health and wealth. The study looks at indicators and consequences of those who retain high-demanding jobs, as well as those who are downgraded (i.e. the unemployed) on what they call the "hierarchy of status" associated with work and earning power.

"We see it in heart disease. We see it for some cancers. We see it for gastrointestinal disease. We see it for violent deaths." In addition, he says, "the stress of low status explains some otherwise puzzling statistics.

The U.S. leads the world in health care spending, for example. Yet, in infant mortality, we rank 47, below Malta, Slovenia, Cuba. In life expectancy, America is 50th, six years less than Macau. In what do we lead the world? Obesity. And given our incomes, we're well up there in economic inequality."

Similarly, British epidemiologist, Richard Wilkinson is the co-author of "The Spirit Level," which contends there's a strong correlation between inequality and poor health society-wide.

"Societies with bigger income differences between rich and poor do worse on a whole range of measures. They have worse health. They have more violence. They have more drug problems. Standards of child well-being are worse, way worse, perhaps two or three times the level of mental illness as the more equal countries, because, in a more unequal society, there is more status competition. We judge each other more by status, and we feel more judged."

All this may a long way 'round of saying what can be read in Jesus' one-liner: "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded back from you. All this stuff you've collected – whose will it be now?"

In the Eye of the Storm

The Jesus of Matthew's gospel is attributed with the line, "I tell you, it is easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain." In response, the astonished disciples ask, "Then who can be saved?" (Matt 19:23).

Only philanthropists can be saved, I think Jesus could have replied. And that would have potentially included 100% of us. From the Greek *philanthropus*, the word is best translated "love of humankind." The word itself actually makes no mention of money; which suggests to me it's only about *money* as the *means* we have to express or withhold our love for others, and their needs. It means anyone of us can be a philanthropist. In this case, it may simply be a question of *what* will *occupy* the heart?

On Thanksgiving, many of us will get a break from the daily news of the disenchanting crowds occupying our streets, and the fallout over Congress' latest failure. We seem to find ourselves in the eye of a storm that's been brewing for a long time. And the task and challenge going forward may be more daunting than that camel squeezing through the eye of that needle.

The late senator Mark Hatfield, was a Republican from Oregon. He was also a radical in the best sense of that word. He was an evangelical Christian and an activist for peace and justice. And, as such, he faced the same dilemma each of us seem to inherit; wrestling with our needs and wants, the self-destructive folly of excess that impoverishes us by its stifling fear of scarcity and insatiable greed; ironically chasing after all that stuff that will ironically do us in, in the end. In his memoir written a few years ago, Hatfield said,

“Radical allegiance to Jesus Christ transforms one’s entire perspective on political reality. Priorities become totally changed; a whole new understanding of what is truly important bursts forth. There is an uncompromising identification with the needs of the poor and oppressed. One is placed in fundamental opposition to structures of injustice and forms of national idolatry. Further there is a commitment to the power of love as the only means to the end.”

It’s hard to say what Jesus would think of the mess in which we find ourselves. But it is difficult for me to believe he would not first breathe a deep sigh of mild weariness over the predicament we have collectively created for ourselves.

Then he’d probably just try again, and tell us another parable. It’d probably be a short one, pithy and to the point; hardly needing a preacher’s long interpretation and commentary. It might be like the story of my old colleague sitting on a street corner on a late Thanksgiving afternoon with his newfound friend. It would sketch for us once again an alternative vision of a radically egalitarian community in which God’s children ensured everyone’s Thanksgiving plate was full, before anyone helped himself or herself to a second helping.

But this time – given the state of things -- instead of sitting beside someone who didn’t have a thing in this world to call their own, or occupy, there’d be an encampment that spread down the street, and around the corner, and as far as the eye could see.

And back home, instead of a camel, it’d be an elephant in the middle of the room that indicated what the obvious next move for us would be.

A former parishioner recently sent me one of those bumper sticker type sayings that frequently get passed around, but this one stuck: “People are made to be loved, and things are made to be used,” it read. “The confusion in this world is that people are used and things are loved.”

To that, Jesus would probably simply say, “Amen.”

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