

Homily for September 22, 2019

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Learning to really Count

In my study this past week I came across a saying that captures the theme of today's Gospel:

“Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted.”

Now with this in mind I want to tell you about a report the United Nations releases each year called the *World Happiness Report*. It measures the happiness of different countries and is always dominated by Scandinavian nations. Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Finland have always been in the top ten. But what's striking is that these happiest countries are also those which rank among the *least religious*.¹

What do we make of this? May I suggest that in their measurement, the UN was looking only at those things which can be counted, things like GDP, Universal Health Care and Education, Unemployment rates and the like - Now don't get me wrong, these are all important measurements and when in place increase a type of happiness. The problem is the report only counts those things that can be counted in evaluating happiness.

However, when scales of economy are the only measure used it can also breed in wealthy nations agnosticism and atheism with no trust and dependence on God. There can also be an association between the pursuit of economic happiness as the primary goal of our lives with upward social comparison. Some people believe that happiness will be found if they can be better than others in some competition. If only they had more money, more popularity, more fame, or more power than whomever they are comparing themselves with, then they would be happy. But such success tends not to last long. The actor Robin Williams, who tragically committed suicide, once said he felt the joy of winning an Academy Award--for about a week. Even those who succeed in being the very best in terms of social comparison do not find lasting happiness in their success, for they may end up competing against themselves. After *Thriller* became the bestselling album of all time, Michael Jackson declared that he would not be satisfied unless his next album sold twice as many copies. In fact, it sold 70 percent fewer. Most musicians would be thrilled with sales of 30 million, but for Jackson the contrast with his earlier success was stinging.²

This plays into what psychology terms “the arrival fallacy”. This is the phenomenon that once people achieve their goals, the happiness that they thought last proves surprisingly fleeting. Like the horizon that always eludes our arrival, the achievement of superiority in social comparison does not bring lasting satisfaction but simply gives way to yet another goal.³

¹ <https://wordonfireshow.com/episode195/>

² <https://wordonfire.institute/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SevenMythsAbouttheCatholicChurch-Lesson3-Transcript.pdf>

³ Ibid

Now this way of evaluating happiness isn't new, but is as old, if not older than the Gospel According to Luke. Of all the Gospel writers Luke teaches

“Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted.”

He talks about how we cannot serve both God and money more than any of the other Gospel writers.

Take for instance today's story and the two characters in the parable. One is a very wealthy man—and the other character is the steward, who hasn't been managing his master's wealth, but squandering it.

Now the Greek word for steward here is *oikonomos*. We get the word “economy” in English from *oikonomos*. An *oikos* is a house in Greek, *nomos* is law, so the *oikonomos* is the one who runs the law of the household—meaning in this case, the monetary law of the household, the economic law of the household. In other words, he is the overseer of the master's fiscal matters, his financial matters, his estate.

So, here is the first point Jesus is making in the Parable. There are those people like this wealthy man and steward who can be very good at counting everything and conclude that is all that needs to be counted.

Here Jesus has the wealthy man commend his steward for finding a way to secure his future so that when fired he could count on what could be counted in order to survive.

We could summarize Jesus first point this way. There are many people who live life thinking that economics is all that matters, and they are really good at trying to secure their happiness this way.

Secondly, Jesus is now challenging us, whom he calls the “children of the light, with a criticism. He is saying that those of us who know that not everything that counts can be counted are to live even more purposeful lives than those who are only attentive to economic happiness. He cautions that we can lose sight of this eternal prudence when he says:

For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.⁹

He then calls us to use what can be counted to serve that greater kingdom that is beyond economic gain.

What Jesus is calling us to is to use the money that we have in this world to invest in eternal dividends.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.⁴

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Lk 16:8–9). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

The Greek word used here for “homes” is better translated as eternal tents, or eternal tabernacles. Jesus is alluding to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or Feast of Booths when talking of eternal homes. Booths was one of the festivals where the Jewish people would set up tents around Jerusalem and dwell in them for seven days. It was both an echo of the exodus from Egypt and a foretaste of the new creation, a foretaste of the world to come— when everyone would dwell in tents in the presence of the Lord and they would feast on wine and have great banquets and celebrate the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life.

We are to use the resources of this world not to just secure our immediate future but the one that is eternal.

What Jesus praises with the steward is his shrewdness and effort: he tries to derive maximum material advantage from his former position as steward. In saving our soul and spreading the Kingdom of God and stewards of generosity our Lord wants us to apply at least the same ingenuity and effort as people put into their worldly affairs or their attempts to attain some human ideal.⁵

St Jose Maria Escriva summarized this well when he wrote:

“What zeal people put into their earthly affairs: dreaming of honours, striving for riches, bent on sensuality! Men and women, rich and poor, old and middle-aged and young and even children: all of them alike. When you and I put the same zeal into the affairs of our souls, we will have a living and working faith⁶

So, this is the message of today’s Gospel articulated by St. Luke in quoting the words of Jesus and interestingly also understood by Albert Einstein who had on his wall in his Princeton University Study these words:

“Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted.”

⁵ [Saint Luke’s Gospel](#). (2005). (pp. 141–142). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

⁶ [Saint Luke’s Gospel](#). (2005). (p. 142). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.