

Surrendering for the Promise

Jeremiah 18: 1-11 Mark 10: 17-31

You may have heard the term “potlatch” before. There is also a Potlatch Corporation which does forestry, timber, and wood products. They aren’t what I’m talking about.

A potlatch is a northwest American Indian tradition. A person is to take their most cherished things and either give them away or destroy them. In our society, we would lock you up as insane, as having lost your mind, as being mentally incompetent to handle your own affairs. You would need a court-appointed guardian to make sure this madness of yours didn’t reduce you to some extent of destitution.

As I said, this was a custom among a select group of folks whose cultural values are quite different from ours. The potlatch would be a multi-day celebration, generally given by the richest in the community. The host would use the event to give away prized possessions to guests, or if a possession had no gift value, only personal value, it would be destroyed. It was a way for that society to build and maintain community. The potlatch ‘giving’ ritual would enhance the host’s social standing of power, connections, and mutual obligation, but also show the wealthiest’s concern for their standing as one within the community, not better, not superior, not more worthy, but dependent on good relations with others within the community.

The potlatch was also used to resolve differences between parties in a very public way, and to seal and celebrate life occasions like marriages, births, and deaths. Overall, the potlatch served to confer social status on the hosts, and to secure one’s place among kin and within the community as benefactor, a contributor, as one who valued the community and its relationships above one’s possessions and wealth and standing.

Here is an anthropologist’s description: *The so-called potlatch of all these tribes hinders the single families from accumulating wealth. It is the great desire of every chief and even of every man to collect a large amount of property, and then to give a great potlatch, a feast in which all is distributed among his friends, and, if possible, among the neighboring tribes. These feasts are so closely connected with the religious ideas of the natives, and regulate their mode of life to such an extent, that the Christian tribes near Victoria have not given them up. Every present received at a potlatch has to be returned at another potlatch, and a man who would not give his feast in due time would be considered as not paying his debts.*

Even after a decent explanation of what a potlatch is all about, isn’t it still difficult to imagine participating in this kind of practice? Imagine your most prized possession for a minute. Now imagine giving it away to someone in the community.

Frankly, I don’t see myself giving up my big flat screen TV to my neighbor. My autographed glossy from Willie Mays is only leaving my cold dead hands. The new

mattress that feels like a cushion of air is not going to be my gift; it's mine and I'm keeping it!

Having that kind of reaction, it should be no surprise that the potlatch was banned in the late 19th century in both the US and Canada. *Missionaries and government agents ... considered it "a worse than useless custom" that was seen as wasteful, unproductive, and contrary to 'civilized values' of accumulation...* *Missionary William Duncan wrote in 1875 that the potlatch was "by far the most formidable of all obstacles in the way of Indians becoming Christians, or even civilized."* [Wikipedia] It wasn't until after the Second World War that the potlatch ban got lifted.

It seems odd that Christians would regard the potlatch as an inappropriate and unacceptable custom, advocating instead the accumulation of wealth as a somehow "Christian" behavior. Truly, the church has really stunk at catching on to the whole Christian thing, Christian values, God's Kingdom of justice of righteousness, and all that gospel-ly Bible stuff.

One of those gospel-ly stories that we, wealthy Westerners, like to dance around is the difficult story of the rich, young man which we heard in the reading from Mark 10. This is about an individual who comes to Jesus and ask the question: *Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* We pick up several clues about this person. He is ingratiating, calling Jesus "Good Teacher" in a fawning way. Jesus is not impressed at all: *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.* Then Jesus proceeds to answer the man's question by referring to the commandments.

Rather glibly, the man responds by saying that he has kept those commandments from his childhood. He is also saying that he knows those aren't the answer he seeks.

Jesus has a pretty good idea about what's going through this guy's mind. If his appearance, and his attitude didn't give him away, he tipped his hand when he asked the question. The key word in the question is "inherit." The man isn't thinking of anything *he must do*. He wants to inherit it, to acquire it without any real effort, to have the treasure as an entitlement, a privilege of birth, as a Jew already blessed by God in material things.

Now Jesus' response to such persistence provides the man with a price he can understand. *You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.* Jesus zeroes in on the one thing that he knows the man cherishes of greatest value to him; his wealth. The price of eternal life is to have nothing blocking its path, your path, by surrendering that which is most prized and valued in order to receive what has the highest, ultimate value. The price tag for this man is steep.

We should realize that this is an uncommon and unexpected demand by Jesus on this man. We find no other command of this kind, and certainly no command that echoes this expectation to 'go and sell what you have and give to the poor.' While there

are plenty of places in the gospels where the virtue and value of the poor, weak, and vulnerable in the eyes of God gets brought forth, we do not have Jesus making this requirement of others to dispose of material wealth. Rather, we have Jesus picking out the singular point where the man derived his strength, his comfort, and his security. By targeting his wealth, Jesus set up a standard that would likely cause the defeat and turning away of the man, or the man would prove he was genuine in his quest, and would do whatever it took to join the ranks of eternity.

It is also noteworthy that it says that Jesus “loved him” before he delivered the knockout statement about selling his wealth. That seems quite out of place until we realize that Jesus’ devotion to the man and to his own mission would not let him offer up an easy answer, one that would be attainable without discomfort, sacrifice, or surrender. Indeed, the statement is framed to bring about sacrifice and surrender to obtain the promise that he sought.

For this man, the price was too high. He was not willing to surrender his wealth to gain the promise.

The rest of the disciples are rather stunned by what Jesus has demanded from the man and said about wealth: *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.* Their stunned response makes you think that either they were wealthy themselves, or else they expected to become wealthy as a result of their service to Jesus, like they might still be harboring notions of great rewards for their service in the new order and coming Kingdom. This seems to be quite a disappointment.

Jesus ends this story, not with any admonition about wealth, but reflecting about what people leave behind, home, family, parents, children, property, in order to share in eternal life. *But many who are first will be last, and the last first.* It is all about what we would surrender and sacrifice in the name of the Lord to follow him and participate in his Kingdom work.

This brings us back to the potlatch and causes us to ask again what we would surrender from among our most valued and treasured and cherished possessions. For the follower of Jesus, we must be able to surrender and sacrifice for the sake of the Lord and his Kingdom, or else we have a major problem. We have a huge obstacle that prevents our genuine devotion to God. Of course, we *are* devoted to God in all ways ... except for that one thing and maybe that other thing that I surely hope God is not going to challenge me about.

This is familiar to God who had to deal with the success of worldly kingdoms and the arrogance that success produced. An indictment comes in Jeremiah 18 as the prophet is directed to the potter’s house. In the opening paragraph, the prophet sees the potter at the wheel. A pot became marred, and the prophet witnessed the potter taking the clay of the marred pot and forming it into another pot, forming it anew and according to design of the potter’s will. That’s a key point, even though it seems a bit silly. Is the clay going to tell the potter what shape in which it should be formed?

That is the point, in fact. The Lord God asks Israel if, like the potter, God can decide to pluck it up and cast it down. It's a rhetorical question; the answer is clearly 'yes.' But it challenges Israel's notion of itself, the idea that the nation needs to pursue its own counsel, not the ways of faithfulness to God. It needs to deal with practicalities and realities, to meet power with power, strength with strength, cunning with cunning.

The ascendancy of each nation inevitably led it to regard itself as its own master, that it did not need to pay attention to the Creator God, Sovereign of all. Rather, each nation came to believe its own national mythology about itself. It started talking in the tones we hear so often today about our nation's "exceptionalism." That's some dangerous mojo. Presidential candidates are competing over who can take our national mythology, expand it to hagiography or holy writ, and then into the language of ideology and a dangerous pre-determination that replaces reflection, reason, and realities. Nations that prosper and enjoy power will come to increase their hubris to the point where the potter must start over and design a new form to bear the promise of God's gracious blessing. The new form on the potter's wheel is necessary because the previous form forgot that it is the **vessel** of promise, not the **author** of its own promise, success, and empire.

And God reminds the people that this is how God engages all the powers of the world, building them up and planting them, or uprooting, tearing down, and destroying.

God also reminds them that God is very willing to reconsider those who would reform and repent. The decision always rests in the hands of God's people, whether they will follow the Lord's way faithfully, or decide to act as if God is not there or doesn't matter or doesn't care about that one thing of ours that we cherish more highly.

Nations and individuals are very good at placing things ahead of God, ahead of faith demands, ahead of the promise of God. When the call comes to surrender or sacrifice that which stands between our God and his promise for us, we're confounded and dismayed. We thought our faith was better than that, but it turns out that we're not nearly as righteous as we thought.

As we proceed through the last week of Lent, we're given plenty to think about. What stands between us and the promise of God, and how willing are we to surrender or sacrifice it.