

REFLECTIONS

November 2008

"Following Jesus in a Time of Fear"

Faith and Life Reflections are a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, and social and ethical issues. Comments may be returned to the writer, or to the editor, Mark A. Staples, email Mstaples@Ltsp.edu.

This article is written by Mark Staples.

Focus of our Reflection

The global economic crisis has everyone's attention as the stock market rises and falls precipitously, as banks and business of all sizes and kinds fail, as pension and real estate values plummet taking people's life savings in the process. How do believers respond to such critical events, which prompt so much fear?

Introductory thoughts

The new century's "crises du jour" have been numerous, beginning with 9/11 and numerous natural disasters and culminating now in a plummeting, unstable global economy. During such times, even the most thoughtful Christian may become fear-focused, looking inward. These days have been life-changing for so many. Corporations large and small, gripped by a credit crunch, have failed or may fail. Homes are foreclosed or cannot be sold or purchased. Jobs are lost, some 600,000, according to reports, so far this calendar year alone. The once-imagined dream of a secure retirement has become a nightmare for many.

"At a time like this, we may focus on gifts that are lost, rather than the extravagant abundance of God, the giver," the Rev. Lee Berry preached in Lansdale, PA, October 12. Berry, class of 1972 from LTSP, retired early this summer as director of "On Eagles Wings," a Northwest Territories (Canada) ministry to native peoples in need. A riveting story teller, Berry told of receiving a 37 cent gift, mailed in a tattered

envelope, from "Howard," a homeless Canadian, in recent months. The gift was accompanied by a simple message. "Tell them God loves them."

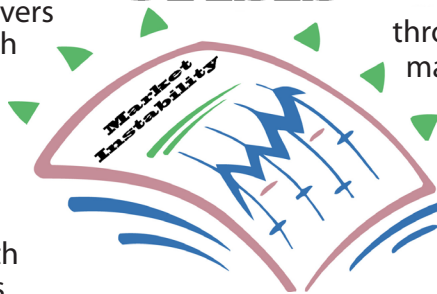
"I had to find this man," Berry said. He visited a downtown area in Edmonton frequented by the homeless, and through diligent networking found the man seated on a park bench. When the two met, they spoke for a time, and then the man handed Berry another seven cents and repeated his message of God's love for Berry to convey to others, saying, "I am so richly blessed." The man was dressed in rags.

"It's all a matter of perspective," Berry said, as he read part of a prayer from the Prophet Habakkuk (3:17-18):

"Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Berry continued, "Add to the prayer what matters for you: 'When banks fail, jobs and retirement dreams and life's savings are lost...' God makes no promise about gifts and what one might lose. But, now more than ever, we need to focus on the extravagant abundance of the Giver." That abundance is always with us because of God's unconditional and boundless love, he said.

Economic Crisis



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Another inspirational story for a time like this may be found in 1 Kings 17. God sends the Prophet Elijah to the widow of Zarephath to be fed. The widow is preparing her last food sustenance for her and her son, anticipating death will follow. Elijah asks for water, a morsel of bread and a little cake. "And her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail..." The woman's trust and willingness to share her last meal with a stranger led to her "having enough." Thanks be to God!

Trust and perspective in and about God, enjoyed by the homeless man and the widow, can be in short supply for many of us in times like these, and the challenge of perspective may be the greatest for those of us blessed with the most material abundance. A couple of weeks ago, my wife, Lynn, and I took stock of the headlines and decided that now is the right time to make modest charitable gifts. We made a list that included this seminary, the Red Cross, Lutheran Disaster Response, and some others. The gifts were hardly exemplary. However, it is not only businesses, the unemployed, corporate giants, the foreclosed, and banks and lenders that suffer at a time like this. Your congregation, educational institutions with critical leadership missions like this seminary, social ministry organizations that literally save lives, and charitable organizations on your list may be suffering too, even though we've seen reports that in times of crisis some do better than might be imagined. That's probably because people seem to sense, as we did, the demand for charitable service grows in times like these.

So how's your focus on the "extravagant abundance" of the giver? Mine needs to improve, but I'm working on it. One way I will do that is to participate in a special convocation Tuesday, December 2, 11:30 am, on the seminary campus. Canon John Nurser of Great Britain will give remarks that day recalling the legacy of Dr. O. Frederick Nolde, an LTSP professor of who played a pivotal international role as a diplomat and mobilizer of the Protestant Churches toward a post-World War II focus on human rights. He taught at the school during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. On December 2, Nurser will in part call upon today's church to be focused in the public square in mobilizing support for the establishment of a just and effective global economic order. He'll talk about

today's human rights challenges too. I hope to see you there!

Discussion questions

1. What is your perspective on these challenging times? Has your life changed because of the economic crisis? How?
2. How has your congregation fared or been changed by these times? Is giving down or up? Has your ministry expanded or contracted?
3. What's been the impact on your neighborhood and community? Have real estate values declined? Have any banks failed? Is there a credit crunch locally? Have businesses closed? Have jobs been lost?
4. The economic crisis is global, not just one in the U.S. What have you heard or read about the global situation? Do you believe the church has a role to play today in establishing a new and just global economic order?
5. Can the church, including your congregation, make a difference in a time like this? How?
6. How might you personally get involved as a person of faith in a time like this? Has your charitable giving increased, stayed the same or decreased in these times? How about your giving to your congregation?

Additional Resources

1. *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* by Scott Bader-Saye of the University of Scranton (Brazos Press, 2007).
2. <http://msainfo.org/articles/recession-preparedness-october-2008-seed-sampler>. A web-based resource on recession preparedness for church leaders by Mustard Seed Associates.
3. <http://msainfo.org/articles/preparing-the-middle-class-for-life-in-uncertain-times>. A second Mustard Seeds resource focusing on middle class issues.
4. <http://msainfo.org/articles/preparing-the-middle-class-for-life-in-uncertain-times>. A Mustard Seeds resource that asks, "How do we reduce our vulnerability so we can continue to focus on the needs of the poor?"

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