

'Seasol' for saints - nurturing radical trust (Luke 18.15-30)

Pentecost 20

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If you're a gardener, chances are you'll know about this product [container of Seasol]. It's called Seasol, it's a seaweed extract made from the bull kelp that washes up on the beaches of King Island, Tasmania, and it's a great tonic for plants - especially their roots. Applied regularly, Seasol encourages vigorous growth with enhanced root system development. And, in turn, stronger roots improve a plant's tolerance to heat, drought, frost, pests and disease. So, what's all that got to do with the passage we've just heard? Good question? And, in the course of this sermon, I hope to make a meaningful metaphorical link. Let's start by taking a closer look at the two encounters described in our reading.

In the first, people are bringing *'even infants'* to Jesus that he might touch them. Now, the way Luke says this, suggests it was unusual. And, also explains why the disciples were disapproving. In that era and culture, children were seen very much as second-class citizens. They had little social status and the disciples no doubt thought they were doing Jesus a favour by discouraging their presence. But, as so often happens when they make such assumptions, they receive a rebuke from Jesus and a lesson in the upside-down nature of God's kingdom. No, don't prevent them, let them come to me, he says, *'for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs'*. In fact, *'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'*. It's strong language.

Now, we're familiar with these words, they don't shock us. But for those first disciples, they were very counter cultural and, I suspect, quite disturbing. So, what's Jesus actually affirming here? What is it about a little child that we must emulate to enter God's reign? Well, it seems to have something to do with dependency. In truth, little children can be angels and rascals, but either way they are generally highly

dependent on others for survival (usually parents). And dependency, an underlying reliance on God rather than self; dependency in the sense of receptivity and trust, seems to be necessary condition of engagement in the spiritual life. In Matthew, it's called 'poverty of spirit'. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', Jesus says, 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5.3).

And, the importance of this is re-affirmed in the ensuing encounter with the rich ruler. You may have noticed that this ruler asks the same question as the lawyer had back in chapter 10 (v 25). *'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'* It seems to have been a fairly common religious conversation starter, and Jesus's response is familiar too - he refers him to the Law. *'You know the commandments, do not ... (and he recites a few). Yes, yes,* the ruler says, *'I've kept all these since my youth.'* It's looking good for him, and then... the bombshell: *'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.'* Ugh, that wasn't what he was hoping to hear. And... *'when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich.'*

Now, once again, those present (including disciples) are shocked as their understanding of what God wants (and what counts in the spiritual life) is turned on its head. From something people like this rich man could more-or-less manage and control, a legalistic keeping of the rules, to something profoundly costly and radical - total dispossession, total trust. Well, as this story reveals, this kind of shift was beyond him. He just couldn't do it. I get it, few of us could or would; and Jesus, says as much in the ensuing discussion with disciples. So, what to make of it all?

I guess at this point, I could go into a discussion about money and wealth, and we could work out ways to get around the radical implications of this passage. I could say things like: Well, it's not money per se that's the problem here, it's your attitude. So long as you trust God you can keep your wealth. Or, well, this was a specific challenge to this rich man, we can't just assume it applies to us; our challenge may be different, etc, etc. We've all been there, we don't to rehash old excuses. Instead, I want to explore what I think is the heart of the matter, namely, the link between discipleship and receptivity, between faithfulness, poverty of spirit and radical trust.

In both passages, Jesus calls disciples to a fundamental reorientation of life; to a shift from reliance on self (while-professing faith) to radical receptivity and reliance on God. One way or another, we hear this call again and again in the gospels, and the notion of 'radical' is important for understanding it. As you may know, the word radical comes from the Latin *radicalis*, which meant 'of or relating to a root'. To get radical is to get to the root (essence) of things. Radical change starts at the root, with the foundation. Likewise, radical trust is deep-rooted reliance. Receiving the kingdom as a little child; and giving everything away and following Jesus are expressions of radical trust, and the freedom that goes with it. This, Jesus is saying, is the kind of trust that is to characterise you as my followers. Why? Because it opens us to and for a different kind of energy and the deep flow of life. So much of our vitality gets sapped by anxiety and striving, which are symptoms of distrust. Whether it's diagnosed or not, many of us feel chronically fatigued - our energy exhausted trying to secure our situation - defending ourselves against loneliness, confusion, grief, sickness, disappointment, poverty ... death. Jesus wants to release that tied up energy, to free us from all forms of bondage. He wants us to be at peace and to know ourselves loved, no matter what is or isn't happening - responding whole-heartedly to life's challenges rather than resisting, which saps so much energy.

So, this call to radical receptivity and relinquishment isn't about God callously asking something unfair or unreasonable. It's about life - our capacity to receive it and really *live!* And yet.....

And yet, we resist ... Self-dispossession, total trust in God? It's counter-intuitive; it seems wrong and we resist. I'm pretty confident, for example, that none of us is going to go out and give everything away at the end of this service. Nor are we suddenly going to stop worrying or feeling anxious. Does that mean we've failed?

Well, yes and no. I think it's fair to say that when it comes to radical trust, we have all failed. But I don't think Jesus wants us just to give up and leave feeling defeated. What we can do, is commit to growing our trust. We do this by practising it. If we can't get there in one giant step (giving up all), then let's take smaller steps. Growing in trust, is a bit like getting fit, it happens as we *exercise* our 'trust muscles' -

taking regular, small steps. And, the more we do this, the more we discover ourselves met and supported. Remember the story of the ten lepers? *'As they went, they were cleansed'*. As they stepped into the possibility of the kingdom, so God walked with them and things started to change.

Which brings me back to the 'Season'. What are practises that nurture radical trust? That enhance our capacity truly to rely on God ...to be resilient in the face of life's 'droughts', 'pests' and 'diseases'. In closing, I offer three practices that are a tonic for strengthening the roots of trust.

First, letting go. Practise simplification - letting go of some of the material clutter in your life. And, just as importantly, letting go of emotional clutter - the unhelpful stories we tell about ourselves, for example, and about others. Letting go of resentment and complaint; of the compulsion to be right and in control. Letting go of resistance to your situation or condition; of worry about the future. *'Do not worry about your life'*, Jesus says, you have a heavenly father who cares for you. *Who, by worrying can add a single hour to their life?* Let go life-sapping obsessions.

Second, generosity of spirit. Practise giving - time, money, yourself! Speaking well of others - offering affirmation and encouragement instead of advice and criticism. Practise listening, really listening... forgiveness... hospitality - to the stranger, the earth and its creatures. Practise saying 'yes' to your life - the whole of it; seeing the positive and not just what's wrong. Practise patience; celebrate the pause provided by that traffic light that deliberately turned red just before you arrived!! Practise generosity of spirit - an abundance mentality. Generosity is generative.

Third, practise prayer - meditation - being still and silent in the presence of God - surrendered and satisfied. Practise letting go of thoughts and distractions. Practise being yielded and undefended before God, open and receptive.

I could go on, you get the point. There's plenty we can do to nurture the roots of trust. Letting go, generosity of spirit, and prayer, let these practices become your way of being and you will have life - LIFE in all its fullness.