

SERMON, ST JOHN'S PENTECOST 8

You'd be surprised to learn that my favorite restaurant on the island is not Wolfgang Puck's Spago at the Four Seasons, nor Bev Gannon's Haliimaile General Store, nor the highly rated Lāhaina Grill. In fact, the Lāhainā Grill, described as an "Historic, art-filled space for elegantly plate seafood, steak and Hawaiian specialties with wine," is rated one of the top 10 fine dining restaurants in the U.S. and has been voted the "best Maui restaurant 29 years in a row." No, forget that pretentious nonsense, my favorite restaurant on Maui is (drum roll) Tasty Crust on Mill Street in Wailuku. My family has had breakfast there since both our kids were tiny and absolutely love its simple fare of banana pancakes, bacon, eggs, and rice, and delicacies such as Locomoco, chicken katsu and saimin. Every time Mary and Luke come to the island it's the first place we have to go. The best part of the Tasty Crust experience, however, is not the food, but the servers, some of whom are the various descendants of the original Japanese owners and others a colorful and cheerful collection of local women full of fun and character. Our favorite is Robbie, a small, bubbly, tattooed Hawaiian woman who makes a beeline for us every time we enter the restaurant, which is quite often. Kisses and hugs abound, there is no shortage of racy humor, and she always remembers our usual orders.

On our son Luke's recent visit with his girlfriend, Audrey, they went to Tasty Crust almost daily and Robbie insisted that she pay for their breakfast every time, even though they vociferously protested. She simply wouldn't let them pay! It got to the point where every time Luke and Audrey went, they brought a thank offering, such as lei or chocolates for Robbie, but she still insisted on paying for the breakfast of these two privileged kids, against their protestations, and despite her own poverty. Such open-hearted generosity has always characterized the Hawaiian people, a generosity that unscrupulous newcomers to the Islands often took advantage of, and which led ultimately to the loss of their lands and nation.

For my research, I've read thousands of pages of Missionary journals and letters. Common themes include both the warming of hearts toward the Gospel and relapses into the darkest perversions of "heathenism" and "idolatry." It was expedient for them to exaggerate the progress of the mission, the "hopeful" signs of conversion, the march of literacy and the adoption by Hawaiians of "civilised" dress, furniture, housing and all manner of Western habits as indications of their success. The degree to which the missionaries projected the most superficial signs of "civilisation," understood in terms of the acquisition of expensive silks and sofas, onto the Hawaiians as indications of their advancement in Christian faith would be comical if it were not for the pernicious effect it had on the economy of the Kingdom and the well-being of the common people for whom the hoarding of possessions was an alien thing. On one particular holiday, the anniversary of the Restoration of Hawaiian sovereignty on this very day, July 31, 1843, missionary Eliphalet Whittlesey proudly reported that at the boarding school in Hāna, he had "made a law that the teachers & parents should provide themselves with certain articles of household (*sic.*) furniture, such as tables, plates, knives & forks. At the feast there was such a display of those articles as was very creditable to the industry & enterprise of the people," he wrote. Whittlesey approved of the acquisition of expensive luxuries as new signs of

“civilisation” in his flock, which he strangely understood as an indication of their conversion to Christianity. The Hawaiians must have been truly confused and bewildered that their teachers taught them Gospel passages such as today’s, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God,” while promoting to an almost gross degree the virtue of amassing possessions.

What I found most troubling, indeed, sad, in the missionary letters and journals is their criticism of Hawaiian generosity. Frequently, they write of hardworking Hawaiians who amassed small amounts of cash from their labors, only to give it away immediately to friends and neighbors in need. They ought to cultivate the virtue of thrift, save their money and acquire all the possessions that signify a “civilized” way of life. The degree to which Hawaiians did this by building Western style houses instead of so-called “grass shacks,” buying cloth manufactured in Massachusetts to replace their traditionally beautifully crafted kapa cloth and collecting china made in England to replace the exquisitely carved wooden umeke, indicated to the missionaries, oddly, the success of the Christian mission. That the acquisition of things to clutter their homes, like those of 19th century Europeans, and the pursuit of wealth should be associated with Christian values is deeply ironic indeed when we consider the clear teaching of Jesus on the subject. Later, when the King was convinced that ownership of land in fee simple would benefit his people, Hawaiians lost their lands simply because it was impossible for them to comprehend the idea of owning the ʻāina, the land. Ultimately, unscrupulous foreigners, who had a keen eye for “real estate,” made sure that they took advantage of the non-acquisitive nature and generosity of the Hawaiians and dispossessed them of both land and nation.

So, Jesus says, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And he tells the story of the rich man who stores away his rich harvests in ever bigger barns to prepare for a life of pleasure only to die before he can enjoy his acquisitions. “You fool!” God says to him, “the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” And the Teacher in our lesson from Ecclesiastes, who cries out, “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity...All is vanity and chasing after wind.” And his gloomy diatribe continues: “Sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil...” How is it that Christians fell so far away from the teachings of Christ that they taught that **not** pursuing wealth and status was a great evil?

The uncomfortable truth is that, while we may not adhere to the Missionaries’ severe Calvinist view that wealth is a sign of God’s favor and blessing, we still come to church, listen to the teachings of Jesus on the evils of greed and the accumulation of wealth, yet go on our merry way completely disregarding that it is, according to him, easier for a “camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” On this one, I’d like to be able to tell you, as Victorian English parsons told their comfortable congregations, “Well, the eye of the needle was just a narrow gate in the walls of Jerusalem through which it was difficult for a fat camel to pass, but with some effort he could manage it.” No, there was no such gate and Jesus really meant that, if our focus is on wealth and possessions, it is truly difficult to be a citizen of the Kingdom. And why is that? Because generosity, manifested in self-giving love, is the very nature of God and you and I are created in the image of God. We are who we were created to be when we are generous, when we don’t hoard up treasures on earth “where moth and rust corrupt.” The pursuit of these so-called treasures drags us down, disables us spiritually and renders us incapable of being who we are called to be. The Hawaiians had come to that

conclusion long before the advent of Christianity in these Islands and, thank God, despite their abuse at the hand of some Christians, they retained this spirit of generosity. You and I (especially I) have much to learn about how to cultivate a generous heart in the spirit of Christ. To what degree do we spend time being anxious about material things? The state of the stock market? The state of our IRA? When did security come to mean, not the love and support of friends and family or the health and well-being of others, but the status of our bank account? When did being “successful” come to mean, not deep joy and satisfaction in one’s chosen career, but making a ton of money? Why, how and to what degree does the possession of money and things define our status, our rank, in society? Think of that phrase “net worth?” Is a bank and investment account really the sum total of a child of God’s worth in the greater scheme of things? I’m not saying, of course, that money and financial security are evil in themselves – indeed, I don’t believe that anything is intrinsically evil. But our **preoccupation** with it can certainly be defined as evil, and how ironic it is that those early Missionaries in Hawaiꞌi spoke often of the evils of idolatry, when they clearly idolized the possession of wealth and all its accoutrements, while those to whom they preached didn’t?

So, as Jesus so beautifully put it, “where your treasure is so will your heart be also.” Where is your heart? More to the point, where is **mine**? I **really** struggle on this one because I love security, I love nice things, I love travel and the freedom from worry that a well-padded bank account provides. My heart is definitely in **things!** But, truthfully, I admire Robbie at Tasty Crust and others like her because I long to have the true freedom of one who is generous hearted in the spirit of Christ who gave his all for us. I go to Tasty Crust, where my diabetes disallows me to savor those yummy pancakes, simply to bask in the light and beauty of a heart that just doesn’t seem to care about clinging to her really hard-earned meager cash. I long to be liberated from the need to grasp tenaciously the shiny things of this world that bring no joy or real satisfaction, just an empty soul. I pray to become my true self by giving kindly, freely and openly to all who pass my way in this short journey of life, not because I’m going to get something from them, but because I love them as a child of God. Robbie, Mahalo nui loa!