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“The Treasure of Fellowship in the Age of Polarization”

A sermon by Samuel L. Adams

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40

We so often hear the phrase, “What does church mean to you?” or “What does it mean to you to be a Presbyterian?” In recent years, “polarization” and “division” might be the first words to pop into our mind when considering this question, as our denomination endures dwindling national numbers and never-ending debates over hot-button issues. But I want to rephrase the question for a moment: what did being a church-person and Presbyterian *first* mean to you? What were your earliest impressions, whether coming to church with your parents as a child or joining this community of faith as an adult? When I think about what had an impact on me and the other kids who grew up at North Decatur Presbyterian Church under the pastoral leadership of Joe Harvard, and then at Central Presbyterian Church, where my mother and Buddy Enniss were pastors, I can say without hesitation my first tangible experience of what it meant to be a community of faith: the Nestle boycott, which started exactly 40 years ago.

For those of you who do not know or need a reminder, in the 1970s Nestle was justifiably accused of marketing a breast formula that led to tragic health problems for children and their mothers, especially in developing countries. The water in many countries was not suitable for mixing with formula, and children were being exposed to contaminated milk and an array of diseases. Despite

persistent pleas from a variety of experts, Nestle continued to market this powdered formula around the world, with devastating results.

And then along with other organizations, the Presbyterian Church joined a boycott and did so with vigor. I still remember Joe Harvard, my Sunday school teachers, and my mother telling us not to eat Nestle Crunches or Mr. Goodbar's. At Halloween, the mandate was passed down that we were to politely refuse when any of these treats were offered. If a Nestle product made it into our trick or treat bag, it had to be thrown away. My friends at school thought it was crazy that the Presbyterians in our class had never eaten a Tollhouse cookie. But by the mid-1980s, Nestle quit peddling the formula product to developing countries, and the boycott was lifted.

This collective action by a community of faith made a real impression on me. We Presbyterians can be plodding and overly obsessed with bureaucracy, but when it comes to collective social witness like the Nestle boycott, sometimes our churches get it right. This type of effort calls to mind the famous declaration of Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Such actions as the Nestle boycott also seek to model, however imperfectly, the example our Savior taught us: that we should never be satisfied with an unfair status quo, especially one that perpetuates injustice to those on the margins.

The challenges we now face are every bit as complex and serious as in the 1970s. We live in an age of polarization. Just about everyone has picked a team and determined that the other side is completely wrong and they are totally in the right. The roots of this polarization are complex and can be traced to diverse factors. On the national level, certainly Watergate and the Vietnam War produced divisions that never fully healed. Later political events such as the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton and the events in Florida in 2000 leading to George W. Bush's presidency and his prosecution of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have contributed to the divide. And of course the presidency of Barack Obama remains a highly controversial affair. Whether you like his policy proposals or not, we can all agree that words like "Obamacare," "tax fairness," "amnesty" for illegal immigrants, and "sequestration" are lightning rods for debate. I challenge you to go home and turn your cable dial to the news networks, hold your breath, and try to surf through Fox News, CNN, Bloomberg, and MSNBC,

testing whether you find a shouting match about one of these topics. Then you can exhale. I guarantee you will not have more than three seconds of discomfort. The round the clock news cycle is contributing to the divide.

We live in an age of polarization and pettiness. Last week President Obama visited the City of Decatur schools in Atlanta to look at some of the elementary schools and their enduring commitment to Head Start and other pre-K programs. I am a product of that school system, and so I turned with excitement to the online *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article about his visit. Yet I made the mistake of scanning down to the comments section below the photo of the President, only to see vile characterizations, inaccurate remarks, and unfounded hostility. None of the comments are repeatable. These were no substantive disagreements over any policy, just fear-mongering.

While such attacks are all too frequent against the President, they also work the other way. It made for good copy on the late-night comedy shows, but Senator Marco Rubio's need for a sip of water in his response to the State of the Union generated mean-spirited responses on the blogs and cable shows. Despite the heat under those bright lights and the stress of the moment, Senator Rubio has been an object of unnecessary ridicule in many circles.

Polarization has of course marked our discourse in the church as well. Agonizing debates over ordination standards, property rights, and biblical interpretation continue to divide us. Go to a New Hope Presbytery meeting, and it's common knowledge what team everyone is on, what the alliances are, and which churches are angriest within the PCUSA. I have been talking to pastors in New Hope and other presbyteries, and sometimes it seems like everyone may as well don a jersey to indicate their team. These dividing lines have led to hard feelings in many sectors and uncertainty about the future of the church.

And of course you do not need me to tell you about one of the more extreme forms of polarization in your neck of the woods. Since we are approaching March Madness, will it even be possible for Blue Devil, Tarheel, and Wolfpack fans to sit in the same room together for the next month? In this area, everyone has really chosen a side, and the divisions are stark.

Yet we sometimes speak as if divisiveness is a recent phenomenon, something that has only cropped up in recent decades, when in fact this kind of polarization is nothing new. Not only earlier periods in American history, but first-

century Judeans knew harsh divisions among different sects like the Pharisees and Sadducees, difficult relations with Roman imperial officials, including oppressive taxation and mistreatment of the poor, and agonizing debates over how to interpret the Torah. The dividing lines and polarization were every bit as stark during this period in Palestine, even if the circumstances were different. In the midst of this climate, an itinerant Galilean carpenter and prophet emerged, with a message of reconciliation, healing, and social justice.

This passage from Luke 12:32-40 appears in the lectionary for this year, and I am coming to it a bit early in the cycle. But it's highly appropriate for the focus on wealth and poverty during the McPherson series this year. Jesus urges his disciples to value each other and not material possessions, to strive for solidarity and not division, to seek God's kingdom and not personal acclaim. These verses are among the most important in all of Scripture for understanding what the Bible has to say about wealth and poverty: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:32-34).

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The Greek word here for "treasure" is *thēsauros*. Jesus declares that what we value in life determines what kind of person we are and that material possessions are fleeting and ultimately inconsequential, that these are not treasures in the final analysis. As my friend and Union colleague John Carroll explains in his new commentary on Luke's Gospel, "Jesus' words deliver a stinging rebuke of a culture two millennia later that all too comfortably fuses religious faith with pervasive commercialism and materialism."¹

Sometimes I lecture to my students at Union about idolatry in the ancient world, the idols and false images that ancient believers constructed to worship deities other than Yahweh, their one true god. But do we not have idols and preoccupations today that draw us away from the treasure of God's kingdom? A few months ago, I did not attend church one Sunday – please do not tell anyone at the seminary. And I found myself at the big mall in Richmond visiting the Apple

¹ John T. Carroll, *Luke* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 271.

Store. I have an iPhone in my pocket right now and enjoy using all of the amazing new technology in my personal and professional life. Yet I could not help but notice the energy, the passion, the vast number of young people, and the beehive of activity at the Apple store on that Sunday morning in November between 11-12. Is it possible that our society has made the Apple store into a temple of sorts?

When we think of the idols in our own day, are we not in danger of worshipping at the altar of iPads, of constantly being plugged into Facebook and email, with the real possibility that the next gadget will take us even further from regular human interaction, keeping us plugged into devices rather than attuned to the needs of our brother and sister in Christ? Now of course technology and the different modes of communication can be a useful tool for churches and families to stay in contact and support one another. Yet if Jesus' message in Luke is applied today, surely many of our gadgets and toys are false treasures, idols that have the capacity to consume our thoughts and take us away from Christian fellowship.

Today's lesson in Luke has an important justice component. Jesus encourages his followers to give alms and to share what they have with those who are less fortunate. It is the same message of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament Scripture this morning, and that is not a coincidence. Jesus gets his social ethics from the Israelite prophets who were his predecessors. According to Isaiah, God did not want the people to assume that religious observance would compensate for the absence of justice in the society. He declares "Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me" (Isa 1:12-13). Empty gestures do not compensate for ignoring the poor: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Both of these prophetic figures, Isaiah and Jesus, bring real specificity to their social ethics. They want a society predicated upon justice, which involves special attention to the most vulnerable members of the society.

I have already ventured into public policy in this sermon, and I am going to do it again now. These Scripture passages are a clarion call for ongoing witness by Presbyterians and other believers to advocate for the poor in our midst. As most of you doubtless know, the legislature of North Carolina is having a budget debate right now on financial obligations and unemployment benefits. Drastic cuts to

benefits will affect hundreds of thousands of people in the state who are struggling, including their Medicaid coverage. Maximum weekly benefits will drop from \$535 to \$350, along with a significant reduction in the number of weeks of eligibility. And this with an unemployment rate of 9.2 percent in North Carolina, far higher than the national average. I know that with the state budget deficit there are no perfect options for the legislature. With crumbling roads and high pension obligations in Virginia, we face similar problems.

Now people of faith can disagree on the best policy solutions to the astronomical poverty numbers in North Carolina and Virginia, but our Scripture readings this morning call us to focus on social witness, to seek community with one another, and to work towards a society not of stratification, but where everyone has something to eat, a place to sleep, and the ability to appear in public without shame. The argument that we should bracket out our faith commitment from such policy discussions is shattered by this morning's readings from Luke and Isaiah.

Yet we see signs of hope all around us, with the very real possibility that polarization will not win the day. As many of you know, there is an exciting road race next week in Durham, the Florence Forth 10 mile and 5K to raise money in order to combat autoimmune encephalitis. My Davidson classmate Leslie McDow and her husband Will, along with many planners and volunteers, are coming together to honor Florence's memory and develop communal awareness about this devastating illness.

I want to share a real sign of hope in Richmond that a spirit of community can win the day over polarization. I often attend Second Presbyterian Church in downtown Richmond, and Virginia Commonwealth University, or VCU, is only a couple of blocks away. Many of you know about VCU because of the upstart basketball team, Coach Shaka Smart, and the fact that they usually give the Blue Devils a tough game. Not a team you want Duke to draw in the first or second round of the tournament this year! VCU is a major urban university with tens of thousands of students, no real center, and in many respects an impersonal feel to it. Students come from all over Virginia to attend school, and many feel lost and completely without a sense of belonging.

In response to this impersonal culture and its close proximity to VCU, Second Presbyterian Church and the Presbytery of the James started a Presbyterian

College Fellowship two years ago. Initially a trickle of students came in to share a meal with the advisors from Union Seminary and then have a Bible study and some time for critical reflection. But as word of this fellowship spread, more students have started coming, and the group is thriving. I just led a Bible study for them last week, and there were 25 VCU students from all over the world coming together for what many of them now consider the most important two hours of their week. The diversity of the group is amazing. The Presbyterian College Fellowship sent one of the biggest contingents in the country to Montreat for the Blaze Conference last month.

The night I led the Bible study I walked in with a young woman who had just transferred to VCU from the University of Wisconsin. She knew barely a soul in Richmond and was clearly an introvert. She had seen the flier about the group in the student center and walked cautiously into Second Presbyterian Church. During the course of the meal, every single student came over, introduced themselves, told her they hoped she would go on the upcoming retreat over VCU's spring break to Massanetta Springs, and asked about her background and interests. I have never seen such a rapid transformation in a person: by the end of the evening this young woman had a smile on her face and 25 new friends. She was excited about being part of a new fellowship of believers.

In the first verse from this morning's lesson from Luke, Jesus declares to his disciples: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The Greek form for the verb here would be better translated as – "Your Father has taken delight in giving you the kingdom." The reason I raise this is not grammatical, but theological. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom *has already been given to us*. It is not something we wait for, but seek to enact in the world as embodied servants of the Living God. Elsewhere in Luke Jesus declares, "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). Friends, the greatest treasure we have in life is each other. Through small and large acts of kindness, the treasure of fellowship can carry the day in the age of polarization. "*Blessed be the tie that binds*, our hearts in Christian love; The fellowship of kindred minds is like that to that above." In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of us all. Amen.

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A lifelong Presbyterian, Adams grew up in Atlanta, GA, where his mother Joanna has been a Presbyterian minister, one of the first women in the denomination to serve a church as senior pastor. He grew up in the North Decatur Presbyterian Church when Joe Harvard was pastor. Adams received the B.A. degree (cum laude) in History from Davidson College, the M.Div. degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School, and his Ph.D. from Yale University. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2001, Adams has served churches in Chicago and New Haven. He has also taught English at a Church of South India college for a year and served as press secretary for the former Lieutenant Governor of Virginia and current U.S. ambassador to Switzerland, Donald S. Beyer, Jr.

Adams is married to Helen Bell Adams, a primary care physician. He has two children, Virginia and Charlie. In his spare time, he enjoys clowning around with his wife and kids, running marathons, playing golf, and attending theater productions. Like many members of First Presbyterian Church, he is an avid basketball fan.

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