

“The Culture of Jesus”
Luke 12:13-21 and Mark 12:41-44
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If you step off one of the restricted elevators onto the executive suite level of Under Armour you’re greeted by a young person, mid-twenties, I’d guess. Behind her reception desk below the giant Under Armour logo are three words written in proprietary font – “Powerful. Young. Aggressive.” Under Armour, like most successful organizations, pays a great deal of attention to their culture. It’s what they use to direct and advance their mission. It’s what they use to attract top talent. It’s what they spend their resources on. Though I doubt they’d say it this way, their clothing is not really what that they are selling. It’s their culture. Peter Drucker coined the phrase “culture eats strategy for breakfast” as a way of pointing to the fact that many leaders of organizations of every kind spend way too much time on strategy when the culture of an organization is where the energy for action is centered.¹

Visiting Under Armour it occurred to me that if you asked many people in America today for three words to describe the church, especially young people, they might just come up with the three that are the opposite of the ones posted on the wall of Under Armour – “Weak. Old. Timid.”² Those are certainly words that I felt about the church in my college years. Reading political theorists, and democratic socialists, and social movement historians, I began to see everything that was wrong about the tradition that shaped me. The obsession with prudish, individualistic values cloaked in Biblical authority. The neglect of the poor. The aversion to risk. The ignoring of conversations about social issues that were affecting the lives of people around me. I was ready to engage the world whereas the church culture that I was most familiar with seemed ready to stick its head in the sand and pretend that its doctrines or its tired hymns, or its formalities were interesting to a kid like me.

So imagine my surprise to find myself as a primary cheerleader for a capital fund appeal that seems to dredge up all the things that pushed me to reject the church a couple of decades ago. Actually, what’s surprising is my *delight* to find myself as one of the designated cheerleaders for this season of fundraising that we’ve entered. Today I offer some thoughts for your consideration as you pray and consider what gift you will bring on or before June 19. And if you’re visiting today, fear not, this sermon may just have something to say to you, too.

First, and this will be shocking for some of you, I am not very attached to any of our buildings. When Doug Adams asked the question at one of our congregational

¹ “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” is attributed to Peter Drucker, though it appears that this

² I find it unfortunate and perhaps offensive to the elderly that “old” has become such a pejorative phrase. It reveals not only our culture’s disrespect of the elderly, but also our fear of aging and death. On the other hand, churches have not proven themselves hospitable to the ideas, habits, and hopes of young people.

discussions about this appeal, “Have we considered tearing down all of our buildings and rebuilding everything,” I think I was probably one of the few people with oxygen left to respond, mainly because I had wondered similar things. If not tear them down, why not sell them and move to a location much cheaper to maintain with more modern facilities that meet our modern needs including accessibility, a parking lot, etc.? As a Christian now for four decades, I have worshiped in theaters, under tents, in people’s homes, and on the street in the rain. Buildings are not essential to following Jesus. In fact, too many congregations today are weighed down by expensive building that they do not have adequate resources to maintain. You should take this with a grain of salt knowing that your pastor, newly married, tried to get his spouse to make our first home together in a NC trailer park because it was the cheapest option.

The question I ask myself about our buildings are these: Do we have a specific calling to be in this place? And if so, how do our facilities support that calling? Asked another way, if we picked up and left this corner tomorrow, would it make a difference to anyone in Bolton Hill? in this wider part of town? to the city? I don’t know if that kind of a question can ever be answered definitively. But I know this: it mattered to the teachers at John Eager Howard who watched one of the tutors in our tutoring program work through a challenging incident with her tutee. She said to me, “Andrew, you can’t imagine how much grace that tutor showed in a very difficult situation. I am so grateful your church is here.” It mattered to the young man, who walked quietly under the rainbow flag every week for a year while a student here in Baltimore and wrote me a note to say that this welcoming congregation had literally saved his life. It mattered to Congressman Cummings who walked into this sanctuary for the Tiffany Series not too long ago, saw the predominantly white crowd that day who had come to hear him reflect on “One Baltimore” and whispered to me, “Is this a friendly crowd?” “I don’t understand,” I said, “you mean because of all the white people?” “Yes,” he said, “I’ve never been invited to speak to a predominantly white crowd before.” It mattered to our brothers and sisters in west Baltimore who we hosted for seven weeks over a shared table set by Jesus. It mattered to Mt. Royal Improvement School whose principal called me not too long ago wondering how in the world they were going to preserve their most important student formation experience that was cut with their budget. Not only did we make the first commitment, we hosted the event that raised more than what they needed. It mattered to the spouse who’s loved one took his own life and knew us through our public witness. Of course, I would lead the service, I told him – that’s who Brown Memorial is. I could go on and on through the last month, through the last century about what it means for this church to be on this corner.

Our buildings are not important because of what they are, they are important because of who *we* are and because of how we use them: to tutor children, to raise our own children in the faith, to break bread at dangerous tables that cross ancient divides, to organize and prepare meals to feed the hungry, to educate us on the most pressing concerns of our time and what the church must do about them, forming disciples who disperse to the world to work for justice and struggle for peace. Like any missional outpost, these buildings require upkeep.

Last summer we had a team of volunteers look at our actual, current use of our spaces, our projected use, and dreams and possibilities for future use. They helped the Session and the Trustees prioritize repairing the towers and overhauling this education wing so that we can reshape some of our spaces to fit our needs instead of always reshaping our needs to fit our spaces. A key part of that reshaping includes an elevator which is expensive.

I look at it this way. We've been here for nearly 150 years. Are we reasonably committed to being here for at least another 50-75? If the answer to that question is yes, then when we have the opportunity and the resources, our spaces need to reflect our needs as well as our values. We know the lack of accessibility has caused tutors who can't make it to the 3rd floor to drop out of our program. It is and has been a barrier to current church participants who can't get to spaces on the 2nd and 3rd floor. And if we are a church that is committed to reducing if not eliminating barriers to everyone's participation – barriers of every kind – then an elevator is an essential part of our mission. It's part of the culture that we create.

Second, I'm excited about this appeal because it gives us all a chance to express our gratitude to God in a very concrete way. I know that talking about money in church is a dicey topic, ripe with the potential for manipulation. But more than half of Jesus' parables have to do with money and possessions. The Bible has over 2000 verses on the topic of money, compared to say 500 on prayer, and 500 on faith.

Jesus warns his disciples that money is a red herring – it can so easily distract us from what's important – living generously. It is so often the focus of our anxiety, which Niebuhr believed was the fertile ground for our sin.³ I've seen it hold rich and poor alike captive to the fear that there will not be enough. On the flip side, I've observed wealthy individuals give money away freely, and a hungry, homeless man share half his dumpster pizza with another sister in need.

The church is the place where we have the chance to cultivate our generosity, becoming more generous human beings; learn to share by recognizing that our lives are not our own, neither are the gifts of this earth.

In Jesus' parable from Luke's gospel, the rich man uses wealth to hedge against his anxiety. In a very prudent and wise way that the financial managers among us will commend, he puts away everything that he'll need and more for the rainy day. But notice his speech – “he thought to *himself*,” “*I* should do this,” “*I* have nowhere to store *my* crops.” “*I* will do this.” “*I* will do that.” “*I* will say to *my* soul.” The conversation is all about me, myself, and I. And then death comes and he finds himself not secure, but alone.

³ “Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition for sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, [sic] standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.” Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons) 1941, vol 1, p. 182. Niebuhr was actually drawing on the work of Soren Kierkegaard whose work *The Concept of Anxiety* formed the existential/philosophical concepts about anxiety that still inform understandings of the phenomenon today. Theologian Paul Tillich characterized anxiety as “the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing.”

Most days when I enter the church office I walk past the wall that has the photographs of the pastors' faces hanging on it. Except for the most recent pastors, I can probably give you only one sentence about each one. It makes me wonder sometimes what's the one sentence future church folks will say about me? What's the one sentence people will share about you? "He died rich and unhappy?" "She worried her entire life that there would not be enough?" Or how about, "what a generous soul she was in her family, her church, her community!" "He didn't have much but he was always sharing what he had."

Finally, I'm excited about this appeal because it gives us a chance to work together and trust each other with our gifts. When I counsel couples getting married, some are surprised that I end up digging kind of deep into conversations about their relationship with money. Do you have a plan for how much you spend each month? Will you do joint checking or separate? Do you think your partner spends more or less than you? Do you have a plan? I am sure that some couples wonder if they've accidentally gone to a financial planner instead of a pastor. But most couples fight about money more than anything else. More than sex, more than chores, more than in-laws, more than anything.⁴

That is because money is about agency, power, and control. Its reality in our lives tests the church's words that we are a family of faith, that we care for one another, that we abide with each other in love. The widow in Mark's Gospel gives everything she has to the temple treasury. The conventional reading of the text is that she is to be commended for her generosity. But in the verses just prior to this story, Jesus also condemns the scribes for devouring widows houses. The powerful will have to answer for any system that abuses the generosity of others, especially those who are most vulnerable.

The fifteen people that you elected to serve on our Session have wrestled over questions of priorities and endowment spending and capital needs. So have the 9 saints that you elected to serve as trustees. A facilities planning team has added their expertise and recommendations. The stewardship committee did the same before that as did a task force several years ago that said, yes, we're headed for a capital fund appeal but we weren't ready quite yet. We've listened to each other in surveys and congregational discussions and annual meetings. It's hard to imagine a more thorough process. I am also quite sure that our particular congregation will never agree unanimously on anything.

Ultimately, the gifts that we bring to our church community have to be that - gifts. A pure gift is one you give because you love the person, or the people, or the God you're giving it to, not because you expect anything in return. It's a matter of trust.

Which is exciting to me because the church's handling of money is unlike any other institution that I know. Is there anywhere else where you are invited to show up, unannounced, no strings attached, participate fully in a community event, and then are asked to give whatever God is leading you to give? That is the dumbest

⁴ The most recent survey from 2014 - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/03/marriage-finances_n_5441012.html; <http://www.sixwise.com/newsletters/06/02/22/the-top-5-things-couples-argue-about.htm>

business plan I have ever heard. Or maybe it's a different realm of being, where trust in God's provision supersedes the consumer culture that we're taught makes the world go round. Where gratitude is the only real response that any human being can make when she realizes that she did nothing to receive life and could give nothing to equal its value.

There is a long running debate in our congregation about spending money on mission vs. spending money on ourselves. If truth be told, the fact that we have that debates is one of the many reasons why I love our church. But the era of mission understood *only* as what a privileged church does for people with little money outside of its doors is over. For one thing, people with little money are already inside our doors. We are church together. For another, Jesus thought the church needed to learn from and with the poor, not treat them as problems to be fixed. The church is not primarily a grant-making institution.

Our mission is to make disciples – people who look at other human beings and think first “child of God” instead of object to be acted upon. People who are ready to cross ancient divides because they know that their salvation is caught up in the healing of the other. People who are struggling with how to receive forgiveness or share it with others. People are hoping to raise children to be more than just productive workers, or wealthy hedonists, or cautious people whose main goal is to avoid pain at all costs. People who seek justice for all God's children alongside the poor. What we do in this place – the worshiping, the educating, the spiritual formation, the organizing, the hospitality, the plotting and planning – it's all part of the church's mission.

I couldn't see that in college. But someone else saw it for me. A chaplain who took me to breakfast and asked me questions like, “Why do you care so much about your own racism? Other white people your age don't seem to care as much.” “Why are you so angry at the denigration of women on our campus? Other people seem to be enjoying it.” “Why are you spending your weekends traveling to distressed communities? That's not normal.” I couldn't bring my arrogant, adolescent self to admit what he saw – that Jesus was at the root of my system. He was the ground of my being because a church had had built a culture around his name, a culture that shaped me. The church had imprinted phrases on my insides like “seek justice, love mercy, walk humbly.” However hard the markets strategized to condition me to treat everyone as customer, or the nation strategized to teach me that American was a spiritual adjective, or the movies strategized to get me to see justice at the end of the barrel of a gun, Jesus' culture was stronger.

It was stronger because some saints at some time gave their time, their energy, and their resources to a church. This fragile culture built around a foolish business plan anchored on a foundational belief that this life is gift, every breath of it, given by a God whose love is pure gift, unearned.