

Interview with Walter Brueggemann

The Episcopal Church, Office of Stewardship

By Rev. Laurel Johnston

In your book *Mandate to Change: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, you talk about the church’s vocation to be truth-tellers so that we can create space for the “newness of God.” Why is it so hard for us in the church to talk about money?

WB: I think we have a great ambivalence about money because as Christians, we know that it is a zone of obedience for us, and we are to obey the Gospel with our money. But I also think that because it’s something—because it is so valued by the world, we would like to withhold that money from our zone of obedience. And we don’t want to talk about it, because that ambivalence, being in and out of obedience about it, lets us work along without having to pay attention to the fact that we’re not being straight about it.

I think most of us are ambivalent or embarrassed about money because we know that we are entitled to some it for ourselves, but we also know that our neighbor is entitled to more of it than most of us are ready to acknowledge.

I think that the enigmatic statement of Jesus about rendering to Cesar—rendering is an exact formulation of the ambivalence—and we are not very good at processing the stuff about which we are ambivalent, or we wouldn’t be ambivalent if we could process it. So it just kind of sits there, I think, and we mumble.

Do you see, is this ambivalence that really leads in to this anxious state?

WB: I think it does. It takes a great deal of energy to conceal our ambivalence from ourselves or from others. The anxiety about finding out about it, or the anxiety about having to discover things about our management of money that we really don’t want to think about, and I think all that does not let us rest easy.

Once we engage in those conversations, we can somehow turn that corner—there’s liberation.

WB: I think that’s right. Talking about it lets us see what is really there, and when the ambivalence becomes visible to us, we have a chance to make some decisions. But we can’t make decisions until its, as long as it is kept under the table.

I also think that God’s Holy Spirit probably does the best Spirit’s work in the midst of our ambivalence. That we, we kind of stay unsettled and open, sometimes we get led where we had not thought to go out of that ambivalence. So I think the acknowledgement that we feel ambivalent about it is kind of a first step in discipleship. The problem is that much of our religious inheritance wants us to

pretend that we are not ambivalent and wants us to engage in denial about that and then we are immobilized about making the kind of decisions that we need to make.

What is the dominant script that plays in our head about money today?

WB: Well, the dominant script for my generation is that you're going to run out, because I'm a child of the depression. I think the dominant script for boomers, maybe, is that you ought to have some more because you're entitled to it, you ought to get all you can so you can live as fully as you can. Now with the collapse of the economy we may have a younger generation circling back to the depression business. I heard on the radio this morning that people in the United States are saving much more than they have in a very long time. Saving is a very different strategy about having money than just getting more to spend more and consume more. I suspect there are very different populations out there with very different strategies and attitudes about money.

How do you see the act of giving, the discipline of giving, as an antidote to the scarcity, an antidote to a way out of ambivalence?

WB: I think that for most of us in our kind of church, scarcity is not a reality; scarcity is an attitude or is a fear that often is not connected to reality. And the sustained disciplined act of generosity is simply calling the bluff of our scarcity ideology and discovering that it is not so—for people of middle, to upper middle class, we have more resources than we like to imagine that we have. Giving is a kind of discovery of that. And I also think that there is something quite utilitarian about giving. It is indeed casting bread upon the water that does come back to us, and stirring the money is also the stirring of social relationships, and it evokes generosity and affirmation toward us that also creates an alternative to our parsimony. It is really setting in motion a whole different set of energies that are blocked as long as we live out of our imagined scarcity. I really have been discovering that in my own life. I suppose that economically, the generation of the retired is the best off, so I'm in a position to be generous, but the actual doing of it is an incredible energizing kind of thing, and I can remember when I was living out of a mode of scarcity, and I didn't have any of those energies so that's been a big discovery in my own life. I think to the extent that the church is short on energy for mission is because we live out of our anxious scarcity, and we can't give anything, and we can't risk anything, so we got nothing come to us.

How does the wider church invite people to live and to trust in God's generosity?

WB: I'm inclined to think that we need to do a much more intentional act of interpretation about the Eucharist. I think the the Eucharist is the great sign of God's abundance. I suspect that we ought to use bigger pieces of bread.

We ought to really act out that this is, that loaves abound and that we are not going to run out, and we don't have to break it into these little bitty pieces and so on.

It's the only place in our life, for the most part, where something is given to us. It's just given to us. It's given to us regularly. There is no particular condition about it. I think we've got to take the Sabbath, I mean the Eucharist, out of the frame of reference of sin and forgiveness. I think it is much more useful thing to say that it is the upstart of the new creation, jump start of the new creation in which the old creation, the oil spill, the old creation is running down, and has failed, but in the moment of the meal, we see all the bounty of the Creator God, offered again.

I don't think that our conventional liturgy does a very good job of helping us see that is what is going on in this meal.

Would you say a disciplined life of generosity is living a life of being chosen and blessed, and broken and given?

WB: It is. It is indeed. And the word Eucharistic, which means thanks. It is a meal of gratitude that invites a life of gratitude. I've spent some energy on those four Eucharistic verbs because I think it is the truth of our lives in the Gospel. We are both blessed, and we are broken. It is an endless process in our life. Our money is a place where we can be blessed and broken.

How do you see particularly the Offertory, the presentation of bread, wine and money as signs of conversion of life?

WB: Well, I think that the bringing it forward of our produce—bread, wine and money—is an act of trustful yielding that I can risk doing this, but it is also an act of enormous hope because I expect to have my gifts received, and I expect them to be multiplied to the well being of many other people. And then I expect to have some handed back to me, which is seed money for the next round of production.

And this process of giving and receiving is an incredibly subversive process in a world that doesn't want us to give anything and doesn't believe we will ever receive anything. So it's a quite counterculture activity that only makes sense when we have some vivid conviction about somebody on the other end of the relationship because a world in which there is no giving and no receiving is a world without God. And most of our economic thought processes a world without God. The whole act of offering is a refusal of the world without God.

So would you see the putting of money in the offertory plate as a prophetic act?

WB: I think it potentially is. Obviously it can get routinized, and it can be handled in many other ways. But if one is theologically alert, that is exactly what it is. And even for all of the lethargy in the church, the church is still an extraordinary apparatus for

our generosity. Even people that are undisciplined, unreflective, un-self critical do understand that this is a place to bring our gifts and have broken blessings handed back to us. So the whole drama of the offering does carry us into a way of life. But it is quite upstream.

Is it possible, you think, to see money as sacramental?

WB: Oh, I think it is. If a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, then the coin is a visible sign of what we have been given, and then it is a sign of the One who gives and it is a sign of imagining my self as a receiver.

In the hard world of market ideology, I don't ever think of my self as a receiver. I think of my self as an agent, as a doer, as an initiator. It is a sign to me that I have another life, another identity that the market ideology always wants to talk me out of, because it doesn't make me a good shopper. And obviously we have not done very well about taking money as a sign either of blessing or responsibility, or of generosity, or any of those covenantal features of our life with God.

What is the value you see in re-claiming identity as Steward?

WB: It's a counter-cultural new identity that says I'm not an autonomous agent. Sometimes we take pride in being an autonomous agent, sometimes we have great anxiety about being an autonomous agent but neither our pride nor our anxiety will sustain us. So that stewardship reminds us that we are operating on somebody else's turf with somebody else's property and none of it has ever been handed over to us as our possession or our property.

So what Stewardship does is to compel us to recognize that we are penultimate. The market ideology want us to regard ourselves as ultimate, which sets us up for being workaholics or shopaholics or whatever and being penultimate delivers us from all those compulsions. It gives us responsibility, but it limits our responsibility so I'm answerable to someone else who's got to take care of the big issues, and all I have to do is look after this.

I think sometimes the analog is like being the associate rector. The Rector has to answer for everything. Ordinarily, the Associate Rector has a piece of work to do and can do that work without having all the heavy underneath stuff, and I think that is a very healthy way to think about ourselves. Those of us who are called into faith and ministry often have an un-due zone of how responsible we are for everything Stewardship sort of sets limits on that and says this is what you have to do: You have to deal with what has been entrusted to you.

One can do that in gratitude and freedom, which I think are what we have to be to be human. The market economy doesn't give us freedom and doesn't call us to gratitude.

Much of the time in the church is that people do not get the big story. What people get are snippets. You read four verses and it doesn't connect to another four verses the next time. But as we know, and when we're thinking about the big picture is that our life begins in the miracle of God's generous creation, and the big picture is that our story will come to the joyous restfulness in God's providence, and our life as stewards is framed by that so that the text that I like, I think it's in John 13, said Jesus, knowing where he had come from and knowing where he was going, took a towel. Of course, towel is a nice marker for a steward—a stole or whatever it is.

But if you take away knowing where we came from—out of God's creative generosity or knowing where we are going—to the fullness of joy and all of that, then this vocation in-between is going to be ill-defined for us. So I think that the big education's task about summoning people to be Stewards is to help people situate our lives in this narrative rather than the narrative of the world which has to do with self-invention and self-sufficiency. That is such a powerful narrative for us, even though it is a failed narrative that is very difficult for us to continue to nurture people that Stewardship is managing this process to which we are called between this initial generosity and this wonderful culmination of God's life in the world.

Do you think since the economic downturn, we're seeing a re-claiming of narrative, a re-claiming of identity?

WB: I do, I think it's a marvelous opportunity for the church, because increasing numbers of people are having to ask well, what is my life really about. And are getting reconnected to networks of people, families, neighbors, whatever, because it is so unmistakably clear that going at it alone, is not really a viable option as we were led to believe.

So I do think that this is a marvelous time in which people might be asking for an alternative narrative because the dominant narrative is no longer persuasive.

Why do you think Jesus talked so much about money and possessions?

WB: Because I think he understood it's where the life and death issues are to be faced by us. I think he understood that if we can decide faithfully about that, we can decide faithfully about everything.

You get your money right, you get a lot right.

WB: I think that's right. I don't know if I would single that one as the only one, but it's a biggie. It really is.

And if it's true that as scholars are now saying that Jesus was really preoccupied with the threat of the Roman Empire—empires whether it is Rome or whether it is the United States Empire, empires are all about money; they're all about controlling markets and controlling resources and funding the central bank and maintaining a strong military. It's all about money. It isn't surprising then that he was inviting people to imagine their lives outside of the imperial rat race. Therefore, you have to come clean about the money issues.

Is it possible to live well with wealth?

WB: Oh, sure it is, sure it is. I mean, everybody's got to live well where they find themselves. And anywhere where one lives, there are decisions that have to be made. I suppose people with any measure of wealth or any lack of wealth, live in a place where decisions have to be made. Decisions have to do with the neighborhood; they always have to do with the common good. We are always called to negotiate between what we think is our vested interest and the common good, which is our real vested interest. It may be that people with wealth are more inured to a certain narrative account of the world, then are some other people, but we all face it. No matter where we are situated economically, we all face those decisions that seem costly, and in retrospect often turn out to be—to have been so obvious. But we never know that until we do it.

Jesus comes to give life abundant. What does that look like?

WB : It looks like being in a neighborhood that is without threat and that feels safe and joyous and mutually caring.

And I think what Jesus called to discipleship is that you have to engage from all the categories of accumulation in order to experience that alternative mode of existence. So the Gospel reading today is the rich young ruler, and that's a kind of a epitome of the whole business in which he called the guy to follow his alternative path and then Peter speaks for the church and says, "That guy can't do it and we can't do it and we're all hopeless."

And Jesus says to Peter and the Church, "Hey, you never know. You never know what's impossible with God. You never know what's going to happen to you yet. You never know how much you're going to disengage from all that and pursue another way out of existence.

I think the Church is haunted by that alternative possibility.

I believe that our reality is always socially constructed. And therefore, who we're with makes an enormous amount of difference. And if we are in the Communion of Saints, then all the Saints are on the road; all the Saints are making the journey and they are our travelling companions.

If we are in another community that thinks it has arrived and it has nowhere to go, then we're not going to be on the road again. And the church, for all our fractures about liberals and conservatives—the church is a body of people that are on the way and on the way with God's Spirit. We sometimes forget it but the fact that we are on the way with God's Spirit keeps us from absolutizing wherever we happen to be on the journey. So much of the trouble with the church is that people absolutize way stations on the journey and think it's the destination. But the liturgy and the tradition are saturated with reminders that that's not really what our life together is about. The church where I worship, we do communion in the round, around the altar. I pay much more attention now when I'm kneeling at the table to look to see who is around the circle. Even as homogenous as my parish is, there are still all sorts and conditions of men and women—and we're travelling.

Well, it's a blessing to be in this holy fellowship with you right now. So thank you, thank you for your incredible voice and gifts.

WB: Thank you.