

5-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Brown, James (2001) "The web," *Consensus*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol27/iss1/9>

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The Web

James Brown

*Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church
Waterloo, Ontario*

Text: Mark 10:35-45 (B – Pentecost 19)

As I read today's Gospel, I am amazed how easy it is for me to look down my nose at James and John as they seek to feather their nest – amazed because I am not ignorant concerning the advantages of power and privilege. Basically, if you want to win any game, you need something that gives you the edge over your opponents. The two disciples feel that their preferred status with Jesus as part of his inner circle is the edge they need. And, because timing is everything, they make their move when Peter and Andrew are not thinking the same thoughts.

“Grant us,” they say to their teacher, “to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus is taken aback, but chooses, rather than reprimand them for being presumptuous, to use the occasion as a teaching moment.

“It's not like that,” Jesus says to them. “Before there is even the remotest possibility of glory, there is work to do, work that is hard, work that will demand all of our resources – physical, moral, and spiritual. And besides, we're all in this together: we are people for others, and that is the only basis for our claim as God's beloved ones.”

When I begin reading this passage and then ponder how Jesus responds to James and John, it is easy for me to be smug about their play for glory. Jesus' suffering and death had not yet happened, and they needed the knowledge of that experience in order to complete their un-

derstanding of the gospel.

It may be, though, that the Gospel writer, Mark, felt that the lessons in this event were not as localized and time-sensitive as they appear to be. It may be that he noticed a little bit of James and John in the people he knew who were followers of Jesus, post-suffering, post-crucifixion, and post-resurrection! Would he notice the same in us?

It is interesting how subtle the desire for privilege is. A dear friend from many years ago came to Canada from a country which was, at the time, a social democracy. He loved Canada and the standard of living that he had here as compared with that of his homeland. I'll never forget his attempt at blending his experience of both countries. He used to say, "I'm a socialist. But my idea of socialism is a Cadillac in every garage!"

One of the forms our desire for privilege takes is wanting to have enough money to have a standard of living at which we are not so much comfortable, as satisfied: Jim's Cadillac (and, yes, he did eventually own one, although it was about ten years old when he bought it) – Jim's Cadillac was a metaphor for a *satisfying* standard of living, one that would, in his mind, place him well beyond the point of having to worry about not having enough. And it may be that this quest for financial or economic privilege is not only an individual characteristic, but also a universal characteristic of people.

A couple of weeks ago I preached on how we might use our Ontario tax dividend to benefit not ourselves, but our neighbor; and I told of the two suggestions I had received for using my rebate to do so: forwarding it either to the Global Community Centre or to the Global Hunger and Development Appeal of our Church. I mentioned how tempting I would find it to use my \$200 to pay some of the bills that would no doubt accompany my cheque in the same day's mail. Well, I did not expect the temptation to be as strong as it was when the envelope actually arrived! My conscience did battle with my personal desire to use that money for my own needs. But the provincial government did not anticipate that there would be a battle. In fact, more money in our pockets was part of their election platform. And it is a plank in the platform of the national Canadian Alliance, a plank stolen this week by Paul Martin for the federal Liberals. Assuming their re-election, we shall receive Government of Canada tax cuts beginning in January 2001.

What is wrong with this strategy of rebates is that it is "not gospel."

As we pocket our refund, we enjoy a measure of privilege.

A few months ago, the Churches of Canada petitioned our Prime Minister and our federal government to forgive the worst of the so-called Third World debt. Remember Jubilee 2000? Members of our own congregation travelled to Windsor to carry the message to the meeting of the G-7 leaders. Nothing has happened. Third World poverty continues to get worse because nothing has happened. In the meantime, we who prayed and wrote and advocated for a jubilee year will receive refund cheques. This refund is not gospel for our sisters and brothers in the Third World, nor is it for us as those called “not to be served, but to serve.”

There is a terrible famine in the countries which share the horn of Africa. Lutheran World Relief is there helping as best it can, but more funds are needed than are available. We could save lives by directing our tax dividend to the Global Hunger and Development Appeal of our church. GHDA has also been supporting the downtown core-Kitchener ministry undertaken by St. Mark's Lutheran Church and Calvary United Church. But our Synod's portion of development money is almost gone because we, as a Synod, do not give enough to GHDA to do more than provide for international relief. St. Mark's and Calvary are desperately looking for other funding sources because GHDA has told them they cannot subsidize their ministry anymore. The people served by this ministry are literally our neighbors, our neighbors in the Twin Cities who rely on the Wednesday evening dinners at St. Mark's and the support and advocacy offered by people like Val Kildey and Marilyn Shaw throughout the week. The gospel calls us to *share* from our resources, be they money or skills or the ability to volunteer. To share in this way reflects the truth about who we are: those who do not delight in privilege; those who recognize that we are all in this together – that we are all children of God.

The current conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians has invited comment from all quarters of late. Among the commentators is Martin Sieff who writes for United Press International. The intransigence of both sides prompted a memory he held of an earlier time during the years of Moshe Dayan. The year was 1956, and Dayan, then a dynamic and confident reforming army chief of staff, was called upon to give a eulogy for a young pioneer settler friend, 22-year-old Roi Ruttenburg. He had been shot dead and his body mutilated by a group of Palestinian refugees who had crossed the border from the neighboring Gaza Strip.

“Let us not heap blame on the killers,” Dayan said. “Why rail against the hatred faced for us by Gaza? It is the hatred of people who for eight years have been living in refugee camps, watching us turn into our possession the lands and villages where they and their fathers had dwelt.... We should hold ourselves responsible for the murder of Roi, not the Arabs of Gaza,” he continued. “...Have we indeed forgotten,” he asked, “that this young group [of Israeli settlers] in Nahal Oz carry on their shoulders – like Samson of old – the heavy gates ‘Gates of Gaza,’ and that behind those gates live hundreds of thousands of hate-ridden people who pray that we may be weakened so that they may then tear us apart?”¹

Dayan had an uncanny grasp of the connectedness of the Arab and Israeli people in their struggle. He knew that the option for privilege came with a high cost.

Ingrid Barrett writes:

I was returning home from one of my morning walks when something shiny caught my eye. I stopped to investigate what I had spied in the shrubs. It was a most beautiful spider web – large and almost perfect in shape.

No one was at home within the web, so I stood for a moment and studied this marvelous creation. I guess the kid in me made me want to reach out and touch it – so I did, ever so gently. And the whole web moved! I was intrigued, so I touched it again in a different spot. Once again the web trembled and caught the sunlight.

We are like that. Humanity is like an enormous spider web. If you touch it anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling. The life we touch for good or ill will touch another life, and who knows where the trembling will stop. Our lives are linked together. What we do with our life is important to us, yes – but it is also important to those around us.²

There is work to do, work that is hard, work that will demand all our resources – physical, moral, and spiritual. We’re all in this together – parents and children, sisters and brothers, friends and enemies, rich and poor, able and disabled, God and Christ, Creator and creatures. There is no room for privilege.

NOTES

¹ Martin Sieff’s commentary appeared in *The National Post*, Wednesday, 11

October 2000.

- ² Ingrid Barrett's reflection on the spider web is printed in *Aha! Creative Resources for Preachers*, 10/1, Wood Lake Books Inc., Kelowna, British Columbia.