

Thursday, March 24, 2011

A Spirituality of Fundraising

Greetings,

Pastor Libby Howe has written the following reflection on Henri Nouwen's "A Spirituality of Fundraising."

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A Spirituality of Fundraising

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I did not go to seminary because I love money. I went to seminary because the living Jesus loves me and that blows my mind enough to need to tell people about his kind of love. So you can imagine my dismay when I began my first call and so much of my life as a parish pastor had to work with money and mostly the lack of it. As much as I wanted to talk about and focus on other things, you know, the important spiritual things! I was forced into talking about money. And so I did, but was always bothered that this money conversation kept pushing out the mission and ministry conversation.

In general, the conversation went something like this:
"Let's do this cool thing!" (often to address a need in the parish)
"Okay!"
"But what about the cost?"
"Oh right ... darn."

Then three responses would follow:

- 1) "Guess we can't do this cool new thing."
- 2) "We'll do it, but what other thing will we give up?"
- 3) "We'll do it, but because of the cost, we won't enjoy it because we will have to work really hard to FUNDRAISE."

You can see how this ministry idea that starts out energized and joyful quickly turns into a mini-crisis when the issue of cost is raised (and I have yet to have the conversation where cost is NOT raised). So the assumption that ministry and money are fundamentally separate and the belief that money is a "necessary evil" to doing what "truly matters" in ministry persists.

An article called "A Spirituality of Fundraising" by Henri Nouwen totally changed my thinking about that cycle. It showed me a whole different way of seeing and understanding the need for money as it relates to doing ministry. Nouwen begins by shattering the assumption that money is merely utilitarian and solely exists to service ministry, that is, IF people are willing to part with it. He writes, "fundraising is first of all, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing your vision, and inviting other people into your vision with the resources that are available to them."

How often has the parish pastor stood before the congregation and felt like she is BEGGING people for money? A lot. "Please, it's for the kids" or "It's for the food pantry" or the worst, "It's for the church budget" (read: my salary). The posture of a beggar is apologetic, undeserving and needy. It also positions one in a "lower" position. Instead of saying it would be GOOD for a giver to give to this cause or GOOD for a giver to part with some money, we begin from a place of indebtedness instead of invitation to the giver to participate in God's amazing work. Rarely does such a posture inspire true overflowing generosity. Rather, it coerces

token acts of giving born of guilt. Yuck! Blech! Slimy! This only makes both beggar and (reluctant) giver want to leave church to go shower.

Even when I was stuck in that pattern and could not articulate a better way, I hoped there just had to be one. Nouwen articulated it best in the article, which I commend to you. But, in summary, here are the three points I keep in mind in order to halt the depressive cycle:

1) Money is a major part of all our lives. How we live with it both reflects and infects, for good or bad, our relationship with God. It is irresponsible of me and church leaders to capitulate to the patterns and habits of our culture that place all kinds of taboos on money talk—the means by which it is acquired and how and how much we spend and give away. Jesus shows us in his ministry that avoiding this truth blockades a major thoroughfare to a richer relationship with God.

2) Giving is fundamentally GOOD for the giver, the community and the world. Instead of walking away from an "ask" conversation saying indebted thank yous and silently vowing not to bother by asking again soon, let the leader or pastor be bold enough to say "And you are welcome!" because he knows in his bones that it is the giver who need be the thankful one: "Thank you (the fundraiser) for the opportunity to be generous!" and "Thank you (the fundraiser) for giving me the opportunity to work with you and with God."

3) Asking for money that supports vital ministry needs to be done standing up! (And if it can't be done standing up, maybe it is NOT vital ministry anymore.) God has called us to this work, and God has called our congregations to be part of it. Pastors and lay leaders alike need to be fully convinced of God's mission and vision for us and adopt a "no apologies" policy when asking people to participate in it through money. As God's children we ARE indeed part of wonderful, life-giving, powerful things that people do not experience anywhere else!

Thanks be to God!