

Proper 20C

What One Man Did and We Can Do

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Albert Nicholas, known as Ab, died last month. Perhaps you have heard of him. You have, even if you didn't know him or know of him, been affected by his life, his faith, and his money. Because I have. I never met Ab, nor had he met me, we just heard about each other, but he is someone who taught me about what it means to be generous when I worked for and with one of the organizations he funded out of his wealth called the Samaritan Church and Family Wellness Foundation. I learned about and was inspired by his generosity not in what he said, but in how he shared his money.

Ab Nicholas was born in 1931 and grew up in Rockford, Illinois. Ab did not come from a wealthy family, and the only way he was able to attend college at UW Madison was on a basketball scholarship. Ab was a great basketball player, and turned down an offer to play professional in order to get his MBA. He served in the ROTC in both high school and college. He met and married the love of his life, his wife Nancy, and they hadn't been married long, when (as I heard the story) he invested the small amount of money they had in their bank account without telling his wife first. He came home and told her if this worked, they wouldn't have to worry about money, if it didn't, they'd be living on roman noodles for the rest of their lives.

It worked. Eventually Ab formed his own investment firm and at the time of his death it was worth \$5 billion. Ab was a lifelong Episcopalian, and an active member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Wauwatosa, WI. His faith wasn't just about showing up on Sunday; his faith was about how he lived his life, and most especially how he spent his money. That Ab pledged or was wealthy is not really the point. The point is what he did with his wealth. A few examples: He gave \$50 million to fund scholarship programs at UW Madison so other people who come from humble back grounds can have the opportunities to get an education and do what they love, like he did. He gave \$1 million to the Boys and Girls Club of America. He gave millions more to update facilities at his beloved UW Madison and he gave the \$5 million necessary to create the Nicholas Center in Chicago, that has become an essential part of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago's ministry. And he gave \$10 million to fund the Samaritan Church and Family Wellness Foundation; whose executive director hired me for one year to work with one of their initiatives called Living Compass, a personal faith based wellness tool that continues to grow and is now being used internationally.

While working with Living Compass, I was given something incredibly life-giving: the opportunity to work creatively and collaboratively in a healthy encouraging environment. This is rare. Really rare. If you have been fortunate to work in such an environment, then you know what I mean. I remember days when the executive director would come back from meetings with Ab reporting how encouraging and generous Ab was. If the director thought the Living Compass staff should all have iPads, Ab said go buy them. When the director decided we needed to have a presence at General Convention, Ab said go and we did and while we worked hard, we were treated well which reflected back into our work.

The director learned to stop worrying about his fear of Ab demanding a financial return on his investment, as the only return he seemed to want was the growth of Living Compass and those of us who worked on it. This amazed me. I learned to give away what I had been trained to sell: the product, and so did our director, and this clever strategy has led to a type of growth that isn't cheap, easy, additional money in the bank, but is instead a growing number of people growing healthy relationships with God and each other. And that is just awesome. And Ab seemed to delight in that kind of growth. He used his money, which he had acquired through risk and clever or wise investment, to fulfill his faith in Christ by making the world better than he found it by touching the lives of so many people, one of which, is me.

I wanted to tell you about Ab, whom I may have mentioned before, today because of the parable Jesus told in our Gospel. This parable might appear prickly, confusing, or difficult to understand. It might be one of the easiest parables of Jesus to dislike, and if you find yourself disliking it, take heart, you're not alone. So do many commentators, and if we had read the next line in Luke's Gospel we would have learned the Pharisees didn't like it either. That's okay. Sometimes the things we don't like have the best stuff for us, once we get through struggling with what it is we don't like. I have to admit, I really struggled with the concept of giving away the Living Compass material because I couldn't imagine how giving away the best we had was going to create any gains; and I am so glad I stayed and struggled because there was something amazing to be learned.

There is a lot written about this parable and its characters. Many scholars try to make it an allegory with God as the rich man but I'm not sure I buy the notion that parables are all allegories that can be neatly and cleanly broken down to create a tidy little moral story. It seems to me parables are more complex than that, which makes them more like life, and also like life, parables are populated with interesting characters, some so real we might think we've heard of or met them before. Today's parable could be like that: with this fascinating character often called the "dishonest manager" or "unjust manager". The trouble with titles

like that is it seems to me our anti-hero is labeled before we even hear the story and so we might be guilty of judging him in a way Jesus might not have intended. What if we just listened to this parable as an invitation to hear what it might be saying instead of trying to affix labels and justify behaviors right away? What if there is something important for us in this parable and we miss it because we get distracted by our judgments or discomforts?

What if the rich man is just that? Someone who learned an employee of his was wasting his livelihood, so he did what most any employer would do. Called him into his office and said he was going to have to account for his actions. When faced with this crisis, the manager didn't deny any wrong doing, he didn't place blame, he didn't hire a lawyer and sue, didn't get violent or vindictive. Instead he faced his situation, weighed his options, came up with a solution, followed through with his solution, and found it worked. So he was commended for using what he had: his power, influence, and resources well. His actions showed mercy and provided relief for the debtors, perhaps strengthening relationships, while not cheating the rich man out of what was due him. Of course all this was not for a greater good, just his own good, and that might be the point where our parable might seem confusing because Jesus might have been using the manager's clever actions as an example of what a person can do for their own good, but could have been a way of making the world a better place by caring for others as the manager cared for himself.

Maybe we also get distracted by the money talk and miss the call to ingenuity and generosity that are present in this parable. Maybe money isn't such a bad thing, maybe money can be used to help create a world that reflects care for the well-being of all people, and that it is possible, to use our money as a means of expressing our belief in God's Love as we experience it in Jesus. Like Ab did, and his family is committed to making sure such work continues.

Today this is especially important because in just a few minutes we are going to be baptizing Coira into the Body of Christ. As part of her baptism, we all will be asked to stand alongside her and renew our own baptismal covenant. Remember a covenant is a commitment we make, like a vow, as to how we are going to live, not just part of our lives, but our whole life, our whole self: mind, heart, soul, and strength. Today's parable and Ab's generosity reminds us that includes our resources, our skills, our time, and yes, even money can be used as the Body of Christ to help bring the Kingdom of God a little bit closer, and make the Kingdom of God a little bit more real so that maybe there can be other places to study or live or worship or work where more people can experience what I did when I was working for Samaritan Church and Family Wellness: acceptance, encouragement, freedom to try new things, where a person is heard, where there is no shame, only Godly love.

Thanks to Coira's baptism today, we are reminded this is our work as followers of Jesus, and part of how we do that work is by how we embody that Kingdom of God here at the Church of the Good Shepherd, so that our worship and time here is renewing, empowering, healing, and inspiring, the stuff of resurrection life we are all baptized into to be part of by living into. We may not all be billionaires like Ab, but we don't have to be to be both wise and generous. We may be aware of reports that the church is in decline all across the country and there are lots of people quick to weigh in and tell us their opinions as to why this is happening, and it might seem that the church could be accused, as the manager in today's parable was, of wasting what God has given it. We don't have to let that talk discourage us, as our Presiding Bishop said this week in the House of Bishops meeting being held in Detroit right now, where the national church is facing its own unhealthy work environment. Instead, we as a church can face our situation with the same honesty the manager in the parable faced his with, and re-evaluate ways we can use our resources generously and well not to make ourselves look better or bigger, but for what God intends: to bring the Love of God into a world that needs it, and let that love of God change the world.

Today I am grateful to Coira and her family for reminding us of the important and hopeful mission we all have, work we can do because God has so generously given us everything we need for this mission, and I am looking forward to the ways we will discover how that mission will be made more beautiful, more lively, more fun, more joyful and more grace-filled by Coira as she continues to grow up and grow into God's love and the ways we will share that love with her and she will bring that love to us and to the world as she joins us in this awesome mission of God.