LAKE FAMILY INSTITUTE ON FAITH & GIVING

THE LIFE OF FAITH AND THE FAITHFUL USE OF POSSESSIONS

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

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Foreword

The occasion of the third annual Thomas H. Lake Lecture, delivered by New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, was just one demonstration of the growth and development of the Lake Family Institute on Faith & Giving. This past year, Professor William Jackson of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis became the first Lake Scholar. During his three-year term, he will develop a course on religion and philanthropy and complete an anthology on giving, which will contain selections from literature, news stories, folk tales, and essays, reflecting views on philanthropy during the course of American history. Richard Klopp, a student in the Ph.D. in Philanthropic Studies program, was appointed as a research assistant in the Lake Family Institute. The director of the Institute, Reverend William Enright, and his colleague Lauren Wright conducted more than thirty lectures and workshops related to faith and philanthropy in 2005. Mark Chaves of the sociology department at the University of Arizona and Joseph Cook, former chairman of Amylin Pharmaceuticals, were in residence as Distinguished Visitors to the Institute. Cook addressed the Economic Club of Indianapolis on the topic of faith and philanthropy in the corporate world—integrating economic work with a sense of duty to others. And Luke Timothy Johnson, Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, delivered the third distinguished Thomas H. Lake Lecture entitled, "The Life of Faith and the Faithful Use of Possessions."

Luke Timothy Johnson's lecture challenges us to think carefully about the relationship between faith, especially in scriptural terms, and philanthropy, or how we share our possessions. In some ways, he raises perplexing questions instead of providing easy answers. You will find in the text of his lecture much for contemplation and discussion. He challenges us to think of discernment—how spiritual values shape personal philanthropy and influence giving—as an outward-looking rather than an inward-looking process. He calls for personal contact in philanthropy, which fosters the patterns of volunteerism and donor engagement that many of us practice, but which also alters the anonymity called for in the Code of Maimonides and raises ethical questions about the relationship between donors and recipients. We hope this lecture stimulates conversation among scholars and practitioners interested in the relationship between faith and giving and between religion and philanthropy.

We at the Center on Philanthropy are grateful to the family of Thomas H. Lake for their foresight in establishing the Lake Family Institute on Faith & Giving at the Center on Philanthropy. The Center has always known that religion is an important aspect of total philanthropic giving and voluntary action. The discipline of philanthropic studies has always included religious studies. The largest share of philanthropy in the United States goes to religious causes as does the majority of household giving. According to the Center on Philanthropy Panel Study (COPPS),* 58 percent of Americans who are involved with philanthropy indicate that their initial motivation was based in religious belief. Scholars have long seen a relationship between religion and philanthropy. But data from COPPS indicate that the relationship between religion and philanthropy, between faith and giving, is more complex than we first thought. We are grateful to have the Lake Family Institute as a partner in helping us understand these complexities. And we are especially grateful for scholars like Luke Timothy Johnson who make contributions toward that understanding.

Eugene R. Tempel
Executive Director
The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University
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* The Center on Philanthropy Panel Study (COPPS) is a research project that aims to follow the same families' philanthropic behaviors throughout their lives. COPPS is conducted in conjunction with the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has surveyed the same 5,000 households since 1966.

The importance of any topic can be assessed by how much it is talked about. By this measure, the topic of material possessions—money and the stuff it buys and the boxes we keep the stuff in—is obviously important. Politicians know that nothing so galvanizes the electorate as tax breaks or Social Security reform or disaster relief management ("It's the economy, stupid."). Married couples know that money—and sex—are the subjects on which spouses most often disagree and frequently divide. Churches sometimes seem to talk about little other than material possessions, whipsawing congregants between stewardship appeals and charity appeals. Televangelists talk about money all the time, offering the assurance that seed money for this particular satellite ministry will yield a harvest of personal prosperity. And Scripture certainly speaks more often and emphatically about the right and wrong uses of possessions than about the right and wrong way to have sex.

The difficulty of any topic can also be assessed by how unhelpful much of the talk about it is. Political discourse is careless and ideologically driven, with terms like "the rich" and "the poor" and "the middle class" being used both loosely and with every intention to distort. Political and religious talk alike seldom touch the actual human experience either of gain or loss. The true devastation worked by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans' Ninth Ward had more to do with the loss of place and friends and sharing red beans and rice on Monday than it did with the monetary value of houses and cars. In the opposite direction, we seldom talk about the new forms of economic slavery experienced by high-income and high-consumption dual-career suburban families with two fast-track jobs, two SUVs and two children at soccer camp. As for Scripture's frequent directions concerning possessions, they are so bewilderingly diverse and even contradictory that virtually any practice with respect to money and the stuff it buys and the boxes for storing the stuff can find Biblical support somewhere.

When we seriously ask what we are to do with our stuff, or how our faith in God should lead us to a faithful use of our possessions, we seldom find much clarity. Most of us muddle through a miasma of concern and confusion and guilt. We are concerned: we want to do the right thing. But we are confused: if we send relief for Katrina victims, can we help the earthquake victims in Pakistan as well, and if we do either can we buy the kids shoes? And, we feel guilty, for the needs and the pleas keep coming, and we literally do not know either how to think or feel or act in a way that makes sense to our faith.

My purpose in this lecture is to improve talk about possessions by modeling a way of thinking about the topic that betrays neither the witness of Scripture nor the witness of real human lives. I surely will not provide an answer to the question, "What should we do?" for I consider that question impossible to answer once and for all. Rather, I propose a way of thinking theologically that may provide a framework for the discernment of faith with respect to money and the stuff it buys and the boxes we put that stuff in. If the discussion is itself to be faithful to Scripture and life, it must begin with the specific, rather than the general, and allow a question to build slowly without rushing to a bad answer to an ill-understood question. So I begin with the story of the widow's mite (Luke 20:45–21:6; Mark 12:38–13:2), which is small and specific, indeed!

In Luke's Gospel as in Mark's, Jesus' saying about the widow concludes a series of disputations between him and various Jewish leaders in the temple precincts:

> And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and love salutations in the market places and the best seats in synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury; and he saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. And he said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living she had." And as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, "As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down."

You notice that I quoted the passage about the widow in its immediate literary context. Jesus comments on three situations that come to his attention. All three situations involve the use of possessions. Cumulatively, Jesus' declarations challenge rather than reassure.

The harshness of the first and last statements, directed, in turn, against the scribes and the adornments of the temple, can still make us squirm. Those "noble stones and offerings" that Jesus includes in his summary prediction of the temple's destruction are, after all, precisely the ancient Jewish equivalent of endowed buildings with memorial plaques praising the benefactions of pious donors, the visible evidence of noble philanthropy. And the ancient scribes with their religious garb and public posturing were not so different from contemporary examples of preachers "swallowing the houses of widows" for their self-aggrandizing projects.

The more we ponder the middle saying, however, the more difficult it appears. It has a double contrast: between the wealthy and the destitute widow on one hand; between the gifts of the rich given out of their excess and the gift of the widow out of her neediness on the other. The widow is said to have given "more than all the rest," not because of the size of her gift but because of its more radical character: by donating two of the smallest coins in circulation, she was giving away "all her life (*bios*)," that is, all that supported her marginal existence. The wealthy could give greater amounts but with less impact on themselves. The measure of giving, it appears, is here less the product than the cost. Well, this is hard enough, but not yet really confusing.

What does get confusing is the setting for the contrast. That "treasury" in the temple was, as we learn from rabbinic literature, the so-called "chamber of secrets." Before the destruction of the temple, it was the method used to fulfill the demands of Torah for the collection of alms for those perennially dispossessed in a land-based economy in a patriarchal society, namely widows, orphans, and sojourners. Knowing this historical fact makes Jesus' saying more complex and challenging. The wealthy depositing their gifts in the chamber of secrets are certainly not to be equated with the scribes devouring the houses of widows; nor are they making contributions to the adornments of the temple wall that might bear their name; they are, in fact, seeking to fulfill the covenantal demands of caring for widows and orphans. They are contributing precisely to persons such as the widow. They do so indirectly and institutionally, rather than directly, yet there is no hint that Jesus condemns these rich folk who are making contributions. They simply are not giving as much as the widow does.

Some things in this scriptural passage are clear: Jesus unambiguously denounces gaining wealth by oppression and fraud. More subtly, he criticizes ostentatious donation for purposes of self-memorializing. But when it comes to the question of how possessions are to be used faithfully as an expression of our faith, the passage about the rich people and the widow is far less helpful. Jesus speaks with authority, but what is he saying to us?

For that question to be authentic, we need to introduce another sort of text, that of human experience. When we lift our eyes from the demanding but puzzling words of the Gospel to the lives of our fellow humans on the planet, we encounter a text equally absolute in moral force but also equally deficient in clear direction. Each of us can easily catalogue the disasters known to us either through first-hand experience or observation or through the news media: in our country the homeless and impoverished and jobless, the undereducated and over-stimulated, the narcotized and the marginalized; abroad, the truly appalling masses of destitute, whether periodically as in Eastern Europe or chronically, as in India and Pakistan; whether at the edges of utter extinction as in the Sudan and Somalia or at the nagging edge of modernity, as in Latin America. The lists make us flinch and recoil. How can we gaze on the face of such endless need and such ceaseless suffering? The text of our experience also calls out to us, "Do something, you must do something!"

But what are we to do? The easiest answers are the simple answers. We can leave all our possessions and join the poor. This relieves our conscience but also makes us dependent on someone with less passion but steadier work. We can gather all our energy for the reform of social and economic systems that we see as encouraging or requiring greed and oppression. But that option also, in light of evidence concerning the condition of people under socialist regimes, seems less attractive even if it were feasible. Should people of faith then simply conform themselves to the acquisitive compulsions of contemporary American culture? No more than the text of Scripture does the text of our lives provide a clear mandate for the use of our possessions.

We shall make no progress at all if we do not acknowledge that such uncertainty is inevitable. Matters that cut so close to the bone of our individual and communal sense of identity as being and having, that demand our using language so slippery as that attaching to words such as rich and poor, that inevitably involve not only our minds but also our tangled emotions of longing and desire and fear and regret, that call into question, finally, even the condition of our fragile physical existence—in such matters any position that purports to be simple or straightforward is, by that fact, recognizable as inadequate.

When we discuss possessions or power or sexuality, we also find it impossible to disentangle ourselves from our own messy stories. We cannot, without distortion, distance ourselves from such subjects. We cannot pretend that we have no stake in the analysis. We each bring to such discussions our own tangled tale of hope and disappointment, of fear and longing. This is not reason for despair. Just the opposite: our discussion is enriched and enlivened by the multiple perspectives that each of us brings to it. If our discussion thereby becomes more complex and murky, then we are closer to the truth, for the truth is that we are all involved in a mystery (of existence and non-existence, of being and having) as resistant and complex and murky as our very bodies. Our subject touches on the truth of our somatic/spiritual existence.

Like everyone else, I bring my own past and my own perplexities to the topic of faith and the faithful use of possessions. I was the sixth and final child of a widow who lived in the economically depressed area of northern Wisconsin. She struggled to clothe and feed her children. Yet she taught them the beauty of music and poetry, teaching them also thereby that the terms poverty and wealth are not only relative but also bear qualitative as well as quantitative dimensions. For some fifteen years I lived within the context of Benedictine monasticism. I found the security offered by a community of possessions a definite step up economically. But I also discovered that renouncing possessions by vow does not remove the vice of acquisitiveness, but only transfers it to other realms. At twenty-eight, I married a woman with six children who had been married to a wealthy entrepreneur. She left a life of luxury for the sake of her children and partnered a literally penniless graduate student in New Testament studies with, at best, dubious prospects. From Joy I learned that freedom and dignity and respect are more precious than grand homes and countless dollars. As a junior professor at Yale, I learned that genteel poverty is a euphemism for grinding effort wedded to anxiety. I learned that the monastic life looked attractive from the perspective of struggling to meet massive medical bills on a less than living wage.

My ten years at Indiana University taught me the peculiar bitterness of spirit that can be generated by envy of endowed and funded colleagues in the sciences from the perspective of a lowly humanities professor. And now for fourteen years at Emory University, I have embarrassingly found myself in precisely one of those endowed chairs in a wealthy institution in the city of Atlanta, where ostentatious wealth and privilege sit side by side with neighborhoods so desolate and depressed that passage through them brings tears. And I have no idea what lesson I am now learning.

I do not burden you with this recital because I think it is particularly edifying. Just the opposite: It is to assure you that I occupy no privileged vantage point for speaking about the mystery of possessions and to invite you to bring your own stories as well into your reflection. But I have also shared some of my story in order to help you see the kinds of questions I brought (or which brought me) to my own theological engagement with the texts of Scripture.

My original ambitions for my Ph.D. dissertation were grandiose: I wanted to compare the ways in which group ideologies and community practices reinforced each other in representative communities in the Hellenistic world, with special reference to the use of possessions (the monastic influence was obvious to everyone but me). But trying to figure out what was happening in a single New Testament writing, Luke-Acts,[1] took up the whole study. The fascinating thing about Luke's two-volume work was that it consistently spoke about possessions, but did not speak about possessions consistently. The more I examined Luke's possessions language, the clearer it seemed that possessions language served a literary function within his narrative.[2]

Luke uses the states of rich and poor and the disposition of possessions as symbols for modes of response to God's visitation in history through God's prophets. Throughout his story, those who reject the call of God are rich, lovers of money, and acquisitive. Those who accept God's call are the poor, who are willing to leave their possessions and share them with others. The two stories in Acts 4:32–5:11 perfectly exemplify the two responses to God: those sharing spiritual unity signified it by laying their possessions at the feet of the apostles and enjoyed the blessings of the messianic age; but the couple Ananias and Sapphira, who broke spiritual unity by conspiring together and expressed that disunity by holding back a portion of their possessions, ended up dead at the feet of the apostle. Luke's interest, I concluded, was not first of all in possessions, but in the human response to God in obedient faith. But he found in possessions language a symbol that could express relationships of power and of human self-disposition.

Given the limits of dissertations, I was unable to pursue the theological implications of my literary analysis until I wrote *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith*.[3] Now I was able to seek out the connections between the life of faith and the faithful use of possessions. I began with a modest phenomenology of the mystery of human possessing, discovering not only how profoundly

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[1] Luke-Acts is the scholarly abbreviation (since ca. 1927) of the books that appear in the New Testament as *The Gospel of Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles* but which were undoubtedly written as a single literary composition.
[2] *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts,* Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977).
[3] In the series, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

ambiguous was our ordinary language about possessions, but also how inevitably and irreducibly paradoxical was the actual claim to "have" by creatures who cannot even account for their very "being."[4]

Chastened by these preliminary reflections, I turned again to Luke-Acts, this time not to discover the literary tropes concerning possessions, but rather in the search for a mandate to guide human practice. What I found, once more, was that Luke-Acts actually contained too many and too-irreconcilable commands concerning possessions, forcing the reader who takes the text seriously as a guide to life toward one of several hermeneutical strategies.

Reading Luke-Acts, we could conclude that only those economically poor are really part of God's kingdom, and on that basis would take literally the command to leave all possessions to follow Jesus. If we did that, however, we would not be able to fulfill another, equally serious, commandment, namely to give alms to the poor. Nor could we give alms if we followed another apparent prescription, that Christians join all their possessions in a community of goods. The mandates appear to cancel each other out.

In the face of such diversity of mandate, Christians have usually selected one as normative and relegated the others to the level of advice or counsel. They became mendicants, monks or philanthropists and quietly suppressed the thought that their obedience to Jesus' commands was at best partial. The approach I took was to expand the inquiry to the whole of the Bible. I suspected that the "consistent inconsistency" of Luke-Acts was not peculiar to that writing but was a more pervasive feature of Scripture. My guess proved correct. Luke-Acts is in no way distinctive. In every way, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings directly connect the use of possessions to the covenantal faith in the One God. Faith in God demands certain ways of using possessions; the opposite of such faith, called idolatry, leads to quite divergent uses of possessions. The other New Testament writings make the same link between monotheistic faith and the proper use of possessions, between idolatry and the misuse of possessions.

Of far greater importance than the Bible's variety of specific commands concerning possessions, I concluded, is the premise underlying all the commands, that the sharing of possessions is both the mandate and the symbol of faith. It is the mandate of faith in God, because such faith sees all that we are and have as

[4] All of my work in this area has been fundamentally indebted to Gabriel Marcel: *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), *The Mystery of Being* (London: Harvill Press, 1950-51), and *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

always and irreducibly gifts, given at every moment and never completely in our control. And since faith sees our selves as gifted, at once always full and always empty, the logic of faith is to share that gift with others.

Idolatry, in contrast, which refuses to acknowledge that we are gifted, but seeks to establish our existence and worth on the basis of our own efforts, must logically use possessions as a means of asserting both: we are what we have. The more we have, the more we are; the less we have, the less we are. The logic of idolatry is therefore envy and competition leading to mutual elimination, since if life is a zero-sum game, it is necessary that if one has more, another has less.

In its negative form, the mandate of faith is clear and consistent. Faith forbids all acquisitiveness and greed and envy as intrinsically the expression of idolatry. Therefore, all of Scripture consistently and emphatically forbids stealing and fraud and oppression and perverting of justice and moving of landmarks and withholding of wages and neglecting of widows and orphans and sojourners.

In contrast, the mandate for the positive sharing of possessions is far more various. It was this side of the issue that most intrigued me. Why so definite on one side yet so vague on the other? One reason could be the notorious difficulty with all positive commandments. Negative commands are easier to spell out and to observe, for they exclude a specific form of behavior but allow all others. Positive commands, because they are open-ended, tend to be difficult both to define and execute. Think of, "Do not kill," which leaves open all the positive ways of giving life, and then, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which gives rise to anxious perfectionism.

But I think that something more is at work in this case. The vagueness and open-endedness of the mandate "share possessions" is connected directly to the open-ended character of faith in the Living God. God moves ahead of us all in the circumstances of our lives and calls us to respond in those specific and ever-changing circumstances. In the last book I devoted to this subject, I tried to analyze more closely this pattern of faithful obedience as a kind of constant oscillation between idolatry and faith, closure and openness.[5]

Our every instinct as humans is toward idolatry, to close and protect our own projects and possessions. But God calls us to a larger and more frightening space, God's own creation, revealed to us in the others we encounter every day. When we obey the call to faith, to an openness to God as disclosed through God's creation, and let go for the moment of our projects and possessions by which we want to define ourselves, we experience both the thrill and terror of freedom.

[5] *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Yet, characteristically, no sooner do we enter into that open space than we begin to fence it in and furnish it according to our tastes, turning God's call and gift into our project and possession. As you might surmise from this brief sketch, I have begun to think of Luther's *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and a sinner) in terms of a dynamic process. It is not as though we remain statically in one place, yet God by decree justifies us anyway. Rather, by gift we are enabled to grow toward God. The gift we call grace is always from God's side, through the intrusive interruptions of our projects by others; on our side, we constantly try to fit that gift into a frame we can control. If we attended only to our tendency toward idolatry, we would despair. Our hope is that our faith is in the Living God who can constantly gift us through others because God remains the constantly surprising Other, beyond our control.

Between faith professed and faith enacted, therefore, lies discernment. God's call comes to us in constantly changing circumstances, which resist prediction or control. For faith to be truly obedient (that is, creatively loyal to the One calling), then it must discern in the constantly altering face of real life the appropriate way for faith to respond.[6] This is the perilous and terrifying freedom of faith: we never know whether our specific choice is "right" but can only trust that our way of choosing is "righteous."

What this means for the faithful disposition of possessions is, I think, clear. The mandate of faith is, in the most proper sense, to symbolize faith. Faith needs to be embodied in ever-changing ways in response to the call of God. That embodied response in physical action, and specifically the disposition of possessions, is not "symbolic" in some weakened sense of the term, but in its fullest, sacramental, sense: it effects what it signifies. Acquisitiveness, greed, oppression: these all obviously symbolize the response of idolatry. But every open-handed sharing of possessions equally enacts the very essence of faith. It is in this respect that the obediential faith of Jesus, which expressed itself in a complete receptivity to the call of God in every circumstance and in the self-emptying service to his neighbor at every moment, can be seen as the Christological exemplar for the sharing of possessions. As Paul tells the Corinthians when trying to persuade them to join in his great collection of money for the poor in Jerusalem: "You know the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

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[6] See G. Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, translated by R. Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1964).

It was in light of this understanding of sharing possessions as the symbol of faith that I attempted in the final chapter of my book *Sharing Possessions* to assess two formal attempts to structure the positive sharing of possessions, namely the ideal of a community of goods which has always tempted the Christian tradition and the Jewish practice of community almsgiving. My assessment relied completely on which model of sharing best symbolized the essential movement of faith as obedience to the Living God. Reciting the details of that analysis would be tedious. But I concluded that Christians would do well to abandon the first ideal and learn something from the second. This is one among many things that we can learn from the Jewish tradition.

I want to devote the final portion of this lecture to a series of propositions (or even theses) concerning faith and the faithful use of possessions.

- As spiritual/somatic creatures, we are inevitably caught in the paradoxical condition of being and having; we truly have no choice as to whether we are to "possess," but only what we are to possess and how we are to use our possessions.
- The way we dispose of our possessions is the symbol of our spiritual commitments, just as the disposition of our bodies enacts the desires of our heart.
- Our "possessions" encompass far more than material things. They include our time, space, ideas, dreams, emotions, projects, virtue, spiritual status, whatever we might claim as "mine" or "ours."
- The Living God we encounter as the Other, as we meet all those who are the "others" in our lives, calls us out of the captivity of idolatry into the gift of freedom, where we can neither own nor control, but are rather caught up in a perilous and liberating power not our own.
- Our idolatrous impulse to self-determination, expressed by our identifying our being with our having, is potentiated into sin by our refusal of that call, expressed by an absolute claim to our possessions and those of others.
- Obediential faith in the Living God means in effect relinquishing our absolute hold on what is "ours"—whether money or time or space or ideas or reputation or self-image or even our notions of what faith demands—and allowing these "possessions" to be relativized by God's project.
- The specific way in which this obediential faith in God is enacted is in our response to those "others" we encounter in our lives and in the ways their needs, projects, desires and demands intersect and thereby relativize our own.
- The response of faith is never once and for all, but is a lifelong series of responses to a God who constantly moves ahead of us. Therefore, it

is contrary to the nature of obedient faith to expect a single, once-for-all disposition of our "possessions" that need never be challenged or changed.

- Although that mandate of faith which forbids the idolatrous clinging to possessions deriving from envy, fear, compulsion, greed and covetousness is absolute, the symbolization of faith in the positive sharing of possessions must always remain relative to the character of the circumstances in which God calls. To be precise, the mandate itself is absolute, but the mode of its enactment is relative to circumstances.

- The role of discernment in the faithful disposition of possessions is critical, for if such sharing is to be determined, not by our projects, but by the needs of others, then those needs must be properly assessed, in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms. Only spiritual discernment can make faith truly obedient, which is to say, truly creative, flexible, and open to the One who calls.

- The sharing of possessions that is the symbolization of living faith must always maintain some genuine face-to-face and personal contact with those with whom possessions are being shared. Otherwise, the sharing simply becomes a rigid program to which we are committed and may no longer respond to the real needs of those we are serving. This applies as well, of course, to such sharing of spiritual possessions as teaching and preaching. The teacher who has no office hours and does not learn the stories of students is alienated from the faithful sharing of intellectual possessions; the preacher who does no pastoral counseling and therefore does not hear the stories of parishioners is alienated from the faithful sharing of spiritual possessions.

- Since as embodied creatures we are also thereby inevitably social creatures, the way we gather ourselves socially into intentional communities has the same symbolic significance as it does for individuals. For Christians, this means that the faithful sharing of possessions is not simply a matter of individual faith but must express the faith of the community as well.

- What was said in the previous points about the faith of the individual therefore applies as well to the church as a community of faith: It has no choice concerning whether it possesses, but only how much it possesses and how it uses those possessions. Likewise with the other points: the church's possessions include not just financial resources, but also intellectual and spiritual resources; the call of faith demands on the negative side the refusal to define identity on the basis of possessions or their acquiring, and on the positive side faith demands the sharing of all possessions. The modes of sharing are determined by the discernment of the community, and such discernment focuses not of the self-image of the church but on the needs of others, demanding therefore a constant attention and face-to-face engagement with those others.

- What most distinguishes the faithful sharing of possessions by a church community from the faithful sharing by individual believers

> is the relative complexity of life together: decisions must be made, organization is required. This means on one hand that spontaneity is lessened. On the other hand, it makes the constant practice of discernment and personal knowledge of those being served all the more necessary, for the inertia of community self-serving is a more constant danger.

I have tried to suggest some of the elements that I think must go into any theological reflection: the careful consideration of the normative texts by which we live, and an equal attention to the circumstances and experiences of human life. By allowing these texts to speak to each other, we discover even more complexity but also certain simple principles that might guide our thinking and our action.

Such principles are themselves, of course, far too broad to constitute a definite program of action, especially one that we could institute and then forget. And that may be the most important conviction I want to share. The one thing we most want is to be able to organize our life so that it does not require our presence; we want an answer in our pocket as a possession, so that we can have the comfort and security that we are "doing the right thing."

We do not want to have to constantly review our projects, have them challenged; we hate and detest discernment. Here is where our desire and God's seem to conflict, for apparently our comfort and security in being right is low on God's agenda. In one of Scripture's most dramatic passages, the Prophet Micah proposes a number of once-for-all projects that might please God: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Then the prophet answers, "He has showed you, humans, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:6-8) God, it seems, does not require a present, but our presence, which is the only gift that is distinctively ours to give to God by giving it each moment to each other.

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The Lake Family Institute on Faith & Giving honors the legacy of Thomas and Marjorie Lake. Thomas H. Lake served as president and chairman of the Lilly Endowment Inc. for more than 20 years, accepting that leadership role after 30 years at Eli Lilly & Company, following his retirement as president of the company. The Lake Family Institute honors Mr. and Mrs. Lake and their many contributions through leadership in philanthropy.

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