
I Got Plenty of Nothing

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

Lent is a season in which it is healthy to be aware of temptations, and I am aware of one of my own: the temptation to romanticize poverty. Nevertheless, I am taken this season by the penetrating words of Porgy, from the "folk-opera" *Porgy and Bess* (1934), by DuBose Heyward and George Gershwin. *Porgy and Bess* is a well-loved and important piece of American theater, though I accept that has been controversial for its depictions of Black stereotypes. [Seeking to depict a Gullah-Geechee community, but to make the opera's libretto available to a primarily English-speaking audience, the Gershwins and the Heywards struggled with how to give the characters voice in a way that conveyed their life experience. Addressing this problem in the 21st century (as the Metropolitan Opera tried to do), some have even tried to translate the work fully into Gullah.] But I believe the song is worth singing, especially during Lent. Here, I present excerpts as originally written, but I honor all of those questions and issues.

*Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got no car, got no mule
I got no misery*

In one of the lessons we read for Ash Wednesday, Saint Paul tells the Corinthians:

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ...as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ...We are treated as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Corinthians 6:2,9-10).

It's his last phrase that reminds me of Porgy's song: "we are treated as having nothing, and yet possessing everything." A healthy Lenten project might well be to try regarding ourselves as having nothing. When we learn to give up things, when we realize how little we truly have, then we sometimes realize how much we have! When we realize we have nothing, Saint Paul suggests, we possess everything.

Porgy describes pretty well what happens to folks who seem to have plenty:

*De folks wid plenty o' plenty
Got a lock on de door
'Fraid somebody's a-goin' to rob 'em
While dey's out a-makin' more
What for?*

*I got no lock on de door
Dat's no way to be
Dey kin steal de rug from de floor
Dat's okeh wid me
'Cause de things dat I prize
Like de stars in de skies
All are free*

And, later he sings:

*De foks wid plenty o' plenty
Got to pray all de day
Seems wid plenty you sure got to worry
How to keep the debbel away*

Yes, it seems with plenty you sure got to worry how to keep the devil away. How to keep away from greed and possession, how to keep away from that obnoxious desire for more. A good Lent may well consist of simply acknowledging plenty of nothing. When we are free from those obnoxious desires, free from wanting more and more, then we might just find ourselves with plenty. We might find ourselves with Saint Paul—having nothing, yet possessing everything.

*Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
And nuttin's plenty for me
I got a gal, got my song
Got Hebben the whole day long
No use complaining
Got my gal, got my Lawd
Got my song.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip