

Sunday, August 4, 2019
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 13 (Year C)
Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14, 2.18-23; Colossians 3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21
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There he goes again! Telling a parable that makes some of us squirm in our pews.

Jesus is approached by a man in the crowd, wanting him to intervene in a dispute over the family inheritance. Jesus refuses to be drawn into the argument. Instead, he uses the opportunity to warn those gathered about the destructive nature of greed and coveting of material possessions. The story of a rich man who has amassed so much wealth that he needs to tear down his old barns and build newer, bigger ones so that he can store it all. All of this with the intent that he can effectively retire—so he can “relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry.” But before he can begin to enjoy his retirement, his life will be “demanded of him.” In short, he’s going to die. That very night. So much for retirement.

Isn’t the life the rich man envisions what we all hope to achieve one day? To save enough that we can spend our “golden years” in relative comfort? That we may “relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry” for the rest of our days? And hopefully for more than the one day the rich man has left.

Jesus’ parable can be challenging for those of us who live in a capitalist economy. By the very nature of our system, we spend our life working, all the while saving so that when we one-day retire, we have the resources we need to live with some level of comfort, for the rest of our lives. A level of comfort that is at least as good as we had it during our working years, if not better. I know that’s what I want in my retirement. How could Jesus begrudge us—or the rich man, for that matter—a little comfort in our old age?

Well, as Jesus himself was fond of saying, “fear not.” Jesus is not condemning those of us who have IRAs and 401(k)s and other “storehouses” for our retirement savings. He is not condemning us for wanting to have a little bit of comfort after a life of hard work. After all, we earned it. We deserve it. Don’t we?

To get straight to Jesus’ point, the rich man in the parable is condemned not because he amasses wealth. He is condemned because he “store[s] up treasures for [himself] and [is] not rich toward God” (Lk 12.21). He is condemned because of his attitude toward his wealth. He is not rich toward God in terms of his not recognizing where his wealth came from, recognizing what his wealth means (or not), and recognizing just how that wealth should be used.

One implication of being—or not being—“rich toward God” has to do with recognition of the source of wealth. From the rich man’s perspective, he amassed his great wealth all by himself. It was solely his doing. He was a self-made man. And it’s easy to see how he would feel that way. He was the one who did the work. He was the one who scrimped and saved. He did have a big part to play in getting where he is. Or at least, where he was before his life was demanded of him. He was certainly no slouch.

What the rich man fails to recognize is that all that he has is ultimately a gift from God. Now there's no denying that the rich man had talents that made him a good farmer, which allowed him to manage his resources well, so that those resources would grow and multiply. But where did those talents come from? God, of course. They are a gift from God. And God hopes—God intends—that the gifts we are given be used to further his kingdom. Not just to further our own purposes. Aside from the talents given him by God, the rich man made his vast fortune by farming land that—yes—was ultimately given by God. Through his good stewardship of the land that God entrusted to him, the man was able to thrive. Without the land, without his gifts and talents for farming and management, the rich man would not have been able to accumulate his wealth.

In not recognizing God as the source of his wealth—or of even having a part to play in its accumulation—the man has a skewed image of himself. As the sole source of, and therefore, the sole controller of his wealth, the man has placed his whole identity, his whole sense of value and self-worth, on the value of his amassed riches. His sense of self-value is actually selfish and self-centered, without regard for his relationship with God. Without regard for the fact that he is first and foremost a child of God. All other aspects of our identity and sense of sense of self-worth stem from that fundamental fact. Ultimately, all other identities and value we have pale in comparison to the identity and value we have by virtue of our relationship with God.

Considering the source of his wealth, and the lack of understanding of his true identity and sense of value and self-worth, the rich man therefore fails to understand the real purpose for his wealth. Because he feels himself to be in complete control, because of wrapping up his sense of self-worth with the value of his riches, the rich man has the attitude that he can do whatever he wants with what he has accumulated. He gained it all by himself, so he is the only one who has a say in what happens to it. And because he gained his wealth all by himself, it should all be for him and him alone. The rich man thinks only of himself and his wealth and intends to use it for his own benefit alone.

A key message in today's Gospel reading is that a person's life is not defined by or consist of the abundance of his or her possessions. It's what one does with that abundance. Jesus would not have had any problem with the farmer in the story had he build larger barns to keep his grain from spoiling. Then, in the event of famine, he would have been able to share out of his abundance with those in need. But instead, he wanted more just for the sake of having more. He had no consideration of others or the fact that in his abundance, he could actually share with those who are less fortunate, those who are in need, and still have more than enough for his own needs.

What Jesus seeks to convey is an example of the laws to love God and love others. That to be "rich toward God" means to treasure God above all else, recognizing that God is the source of all we have and that our identity and value is to be found in our relationship with God. And through that relationship, we are to have faith and be willing to share with others rather than hoard everything for ourselves. Rather than placing our hopes for security in the material, the only true source of security is the freedom that comes from and through relationship with God.

Our Old Testament reading from Ecclesiastes conveys these same concepts in different terms. The Teacher, as he is called, writes about the futility of our labors when done for our own selfish purposes. He refers to such toils as “vanity and chasing after wind.” He does not mean vanity as in excessive pride or admiration. Rather, the Hebrew word we translate as “vanity”—*hebel*—means vapor or mist, a substance that disappears. Implying that if our labors are not entered into from a proper perspective, they are as vapor, disappearing, resulting in emptiness or meaninglessness. That a life focused on transitory material possessions and selfish pleasures is vanity—is empty and futile. But entered into with God as the source and the foundation for our labors, our labors can and do have purpose and meaning. The purpose and meaning for which we were created.

Paul, in writing to the Colossians, puts it yet another way: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3.2). That through our life in Christ, our true life, our true identity, is not found in the accumulation of wealth, or in such earthly pursuits and actions as fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language. Our true security and identity is found in Christ and in living according to his ways. That our true security and identity is found in the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. From this perspective, life in Christ includes, requires, a radical reorientation of our values to be in accordance with God’s values.

Our Gospel reading for today—indeed, all of our readings—raise questions as to how we manage the gifts that God has given us and the way we choose to live our lives. Specifically, what do our practices regarding our material possessions and the way we live our lives say about our understanding of God, God’s purposes, and of relationship with God? What we have, what we accumulate, is not inherently bad. It’s what we do with it that is important. It’s about what we do with what God has given us. Or rather, what God has entrusted into our care during our time on this earth.

Most of us will probably never have wealth on par with the rich man in today’s Gospel reading. But if we orient our lives toward Christ, if we share out of our relative abundance to spread the Good News, if we are rich toward God by placing our sense of value and self-worth in our relationship with God and live accordingly, we will have riches beyond compare. Maybe not in terms of monetary wealth, but in the only way that truly matters.