

Sunday, July 31, 2022
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 13 (Year C)

Luke 12.13.-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1093845414869751>

(Sermon begins at about 19:20)

“What Defines Who You Are?”

One of the things I particularly enjoy is watching YouTube videos on such topics as minimalism, essentialism, decluttering, and organization. Always searching for tips and ideas about how I can live a more minimalist lifestyle. In the strictest sense, a minimalist is one who only has what they absolutely need to live. The idea being that much of what we have is not really necessary and, if anything, distracts us and gets in the way of living more intentionally and doing what matters most to us. Invariably, the focus is about creating space in our lives for what is essential: for our relationships and for pursuing those activities which contribute to who we ultimately want to be. Whatever and whoever that is for the individual. In the church, we would use the language of focusing on those relationships, on those things and activities, that help us to live more fully into who God has created and is calling us to be as beloved children of God.

Looking around my apartment, some would say I am by no means a minimalist. Over the last decade or so, I have been working to rid myself things that I just did not use or want anymore. Things that are just taking up space, requiring my attention to clean and maintain them while not adding any particular value to my current life. But I still have many things that, while maybe not necessary, are things I enjoy. Things that I feel add value or meaning to my life. And part of that journey has been to adopt a more minimalist mindset: to be very intentional about what I bring into my life and my home. Do I really need that particular item? Will it add value to my life or to my living environment in some way? While maybe not a minimalist per se, I have created a living environment that is, for me, comfortable, easy to care for, and reflects something of my own personality and interests. An environment that supports me in my pursuit of what is most important to me. My relationship with God, my spiritual life and development, and my vocation as a priest, just to name a few of the major aspects of my life.

The bulk of today’s Gospel reading is the story of a man who, similarly, sought to create an environment that supports him in his pursuit of what is most important to him. Jesus tells this parable in response to someone who is apparently concerned with financial well-being. A common concern in any age. Just consider the current angst in our society over the high rate of inflation and fears that we may be heading into a recession. Angst that is reflected in increased volatility in the stock market as numbers soar because the Federal Reserve is taking actions to curb inflation, only to have numbers plummet because investors realize that higher interest rates could cut into their profit margins. All reflecting an obsession with wealth. Or, as is more likely the case here, just plain greed.

Such concerns are not new to our age. In fact, Jesus probably preached more about wealth—its accumulation and its use—than any other subject. Today he issues a pretty stern warning:

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And then, to illustrate his point, he tells of the rich fool who had so much wealth, so many possessions, that he had to tear down all his barns and build bigger ones to accommodate the rampant excess. Only to die the very day he completed his building project and thought he could now finally enjoy the fruits of his labors. All that work to take care of and build bigger and better places to store his exorbitant wealth, only to have it yanked out from under him—or rather, to have his life yanked out from under him—before he even had a chance to “relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry.”

Now, to be clear, Jesus is not saying that having lots of possessions or the accumulation of wealth is a bad thing. In all his preaching and teaching on the subject, he never said people should not have things that they need to live a comfortable life or that they should not save money for a rainy day or for a comfortable retirement. If anything, in our own culture, having savings for emergencies and certainly for retirement is prudent. Such necessities notwithstanding, Jesus is very clear in his message about possessions and wealth and particularly how we use them. Probably one of the clearest statement is in today’s Gospel, warning about greed and not allowing wealth and possessions to be the driving force in one’s life. Elsewhere, his message is similar: it’s not that wealth is good or bad; its what you do with it that makes it so.

So what went wrong for the rich fool in today’s Gospel? Of course, all we know is what we are told, but in typical Jesus-fashion, all we need to know is right there in the parable.

First, by all accounts, the rich fool was obsessed with the accumulation of wealth, to the exclusion of all else. He had barns that were filled to overflowing with grain and other possessions. And still, he sought to gain even more. Without consideration of where he was going to store the excess. Which implies that he had way more than was needed to begin with. If you have to tear down barns and build bigger ones, you probably have too much as it is.

A second major thing that stands out in the parable is that as the rich fool tries to figure out what to do, he does it all by himself. Apparently, to the point of not even seeking the counsel and advice of others. His deliberations and ultimate decisions are his and his alone. Which is his prerogative. But then again, when undertaking such an endeavor, it is advisable to seek other opinions. To seek expert advice. But instead, he proceeds based solely on selfish motives: to accumulate more and more. In short, greed. Was tearing down his barns and building larger ones the best choice financially or otherwise? Couldn’t he have built additional barns instead of wasting the ones he already had? And then there is the issue of the vast abundance. Particularly the grain. If he has so much to begin with, it is liable to spoil before he can get around to using it. Maybe he could have sold some of his excess. Or maybe he could have given away some of the excess to those who might otherwise not have what they needed to survive. Which, frankly, would have probably been more to God’s liking than the rich fool making provisions to horde his vast excess.

Which leads to a third implication of the rich fool’s actions. That he takes no account of God in his plans. To consider what God might have been calling him to do with his vast wealth. This seems to be a major concern for Jesus, since he finishes by saying, “So it is with those who store

up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” That just as the man’s life was taken from him, our lives are essentially meaningless without relationship with God. That it is God who gives us life, who gives us what we have, and perhaps more importantly, who gives us purpose. That we are not meant to live for ourselves alone, but to live in service to God, according to his commandments. To live into what it means to be beloved children of God. To live into what it means to be those who are made in the image and likeness of God. And part of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God is to operate out of a place of selfless love and concern for others. To live out of a place of generosity. To share of the bounty we have been blessed to have received so that others might also benefit and have the opportunity to live into the fullness of who they are as beloved children of God.

While the presenting issue that Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel is the accumulation and use of wealth, that is only part of the picture. As previously noted, wealth, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It can be life-giving and transformative when used to create new jobs or innovative technologies that address other societal concerns. It can be a blessing when given as charitable contributions to help with issues of homelessness or feeding the hungry or providing medical care to those who do not otherwise have access to it. But as Jesus is clear to point out, “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” It is not the abundance of possessions that defines who we are. There are far more basic things that ultimately define who we are. Some of which is present in the parable of the rich fool and some of which is absent. Who we are is certainly defined by what we do and how we act. Which is the subject of the parable. But also, we are defined by our relationships with God and with others, which is notably lacking in the parable.

The parable of the rich fool raises questions about how one defines one’s own life. How one defines their worth. All couched in terms of possessions and the environment to accommodate those possessions. As with all Jesus’ parables, the circumstances may not coincide with where we are in our own lives. But the questions raised are applicable to all of us, nonetheless. Everyone has to decide for themselves what defines their life. What in their own life provides meaning and a sense of worth. Everyone has to decide for themselves what they need to live the life they feel called to live and to engage in the endeavors they wish to pursue as part of that life. How their possessions and environment support them in their pursuit of what is most important to them, in terms of work, recreational activities, relationships, etc. The important thing, the primary determinant, is your purpose, your priorities. What is it that defines who you are? Is it the wealth and possessions themselves or how you use them that defines who you are or who you want to be? Is it your relationship with your wealth and possessions or your relationship with God and with others that define who you are or who you want to be? These are the fundamental, existential questions that Jesus raises in today’s Gospel lesson.

So, what is it that defines who you are and who you want to be?