

Pentecost 10
Proper 13
August 5, 2007
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The parable told by Jesus in the Gospel this morning is a reminder that money can be a distraction that influences our relationship with God. In order to fully understand the point of the parable Jesus tells I found it helpful to know what was going on in Luke's Gospel just before Jesus tells this story. Jesus has been a dinner guest of a Pharisee. He is certainly not a very gracious guest. The Pharisee is surprised by some of Jesus actions, knowing that he had been raised in a proper Jewish household. For example, the Pharisee wonders why Jesus does not wash his hands before he comes to the table to eat. Jesus replies, "You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?" Not exactly a gracious response to one's host. He goes on to accuse the Pharisee of being full of greed and wickedness.

Three times in the course of dinner Jesus calls Pharisees "fools." After dinner when he goes outside the scribes and Pharisees, according to Luke, are hostile toward Jesus and began to question him. Understandable. Meanwhile a crowd of thousands begins to gather around Jesus wanting to hear what he has to say. In the midst of this tension between the Pharisees and those who came to be taught by Jesus is a teaching about discipleship.

Then we come to today's Gospel. Some fellow absorbed with himself rather than what Jesus is saying stands up and says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." It was not uncommon at the time for someone to ask a rabbi or teacher to act as judge on issues of right conduct. Then, as now, disputes about inheritance could tie up property for a long time and cause long lasting family conflict. The man wants Jesus to command his brother to divide the family inheritance with him.

However, Luke makes it clear that the man's motivation was self interest rather than the working of inheritance laws. Jesus refuses to be drawn into the dispute. Instead he uses this interruption as a vehicle for teaching.

Jesus warned against greed, saying, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." He goes on to tell the parable of the rich fool. This parable hit me right between the eyes having just returned to this country from a trip to Europe where people practice conservation and economy in

ways that as an American brought me up short. Who will deny that we Americans want more stuff?

I think of Dan Matthews' visit to York two years ago during our 250 anniversary celebration. I invited Dan to talk to the diocesan clergy about stewardship and the struggle we face encouraging people of God to think beyond their own wants and perceived needs. Dan talked about going to Wal Mart to purchase one item. As he enters the store he is invited to take a cart in which to place that which he has come to purchase. This is not just any cart, it is a **big cart** for lots of stuff. As he walks through the store he sees a bargain here and another over there. He came for one item and pretty soon he has a cart full of stuff. When he gets home his wife asked what is in all the bags. He begins to explain about all the stuff that was a good price. His wife asks why he thinks it is a bargain if he really does not have any need of all the extra stuff he has brought home. Her question becomes, when is enough more than enough?

We want all the latest things to make our lives easier. We want a bigger car, a bigger house, a bigger paycheck - we want more and more and we want it now. Yet, if we look at our lives we realize that we are all richly blessed. We in this country are like the rich man in today's parable. We have an over abundance of good things.

The rich man in Jesus' story built new, larger barns to store up all the possessions he had accumulated so he could relax, eat, drink and be merry. We won't talk about the fastest growing industry in America, climate controlled storage units for all our extra stuff.

Listen to the man in the parable. What should I do? I have no place to store all my crops. I will do this. I will build bigger barns. I will store my grain and my goods. This man is concerned about no one but himself. He is spiritually dead. He has no relationship with God and concern for his neighbor is the farthest thing from his mind.

Then Jesus delivers the punch line. God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Money and things can do this to us. Our problem is not a lack of space, like the rich man, or even too much of a good thing. Jesus identified our problem,

"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Working ourselves to death just to get more stuff and a bigger place to store it is "vanity and chasing after the wind." When blessings overflow our hearts and homes we have an opportunity to share with others and not hoard blessings in our expanded closets or rented storage units. Let us invest not in expansion projects but in the neighbor down the street's struggle to provide for their children or the elderly citizen searching for ways to stretch a monthly pension check.

The problem Jesus points out to us is one of focus. It is easy to focus on material blessings of which we never get enough, and yet God has blessed each and every one of us with more than enough. The riches that truly fill our lives with plenteousness do not need barns or banks. Gifts of grace and new life flow into our lives in the simplest means: water and words of love, bread and wine, silence and song.

Travels remind me of a trip that has forever changed my life. We met on this trip people who suffered beyond my imagination under the grips of communism in Russia. We heard stories of incredible faith in the face of dangers you and I are fortunate never to have experienced. In St. Petersburg a tiny group of people met weekly in secret to keep the faith. For sixty years they prayed together without clergy or any official liturgy. After the fall of the Communist regime, clergy from a neighboring community began to visit these people once a month to celebrate the Eucharist. The people rolled out a makeshift altar and set up communion vessels they had kept carefully hidden amongst themselves. A group of twenty people ranging from wrinkled faced "babushkas" to ruddy faced children gathered to sing the beautiful tones of the traditional Orthodox liturgy. There was not a dry eye in the place as people knelt on the bare wood to receive the Bread of Life.

After the service ended people gathered around a makeshift table laden with traditional Russian foods. In the midst of poverty and oppression they were surrounded with true wealth. It was a wealth a barn or a bank could never hold. It was the wealth of God's love freely given and freely received; the wealth of new life, of sins forgiven, and hope.

There is good news for us in this story. We can have treasure and be rich toward God. We have to pay attention. We have to pay attention and acknowledge that all that fills our lives is a gift and God is the provider.

In thankfulness, we are invited to share. We are reminded that love of neighbor calls us to be attentive to the needs of others and when possible to give out of our abundance so others might experience God's grace.

"Open our eyes, O Lord, to behold your gracious hand in all your works, that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may honor you with our substance and be faithful stewards of your bounty...." Amen