

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday August 4, 2019 Proper 13C  
Text Luke 12:13-21  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Theme: Rich Toward God.

In today's gospel, A young man approaches Jesus to help him settle a family dispute about his inheritance. He clearly thinks that Jesus, a wise and compassionate Rabbi, can bring some fairness into his situation. He's been shut out by his older brother and is understandably upset. Indeed rabbis were known to help settle inheritance disputes. But Jesus does not seem very interested in this family squabble over money, he simply won't play.

In response he offers some surprising instruction and a great parable.

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Luke 12:15

Greed! Is the injured brother being greedy? It hardly seems so. He just wants what is fair. But Jesus is concerned with something deeper, the human tendency toward greed. We don't talk about greed much especially at church, even less often in the middle of a beautiful park.

Greed for Jesus is a great danger, for American culture greed seems to be an almost acceptable aspiration. While Greed can fasten upon many objects: money, power, influence, sex, status, etc. Its appetite is always the same, **it eats and remains hungry**. The person cannot be satisfied with the acquisition of the desired objects. One always needs more but when one gets more it is still not enough. What is Greed? Greed is an endless search for more that leaves the searcher experiencing lack rather than fulfillment.

Jesus sees greed as a great danger lurking nearby always ready to attempt a hostile takeover of our desires. I imagine that some of you are wishing that the preacher would move on, consider another topic or just wrap things up quickly before all of this meddling in people's personal affairs gets out of hand. Come on, it's a beautiful day in the park quit talking about greed.

Ok, well even Jesus moves on to tell a story about a very successful farmer who is so good at what he does he has an over-abundance of grain and goods. While the story stresses the abundance of the earth's life, the farmer is busy congratulating himself. He is so successful that he cannot store it all in his existing facilities. He decides to participate in the abundance by possession. He will build bigger barns, tearing down so that he can hold on to all the excess. Bigger is better, more is well more.

The farmer whom I take to be a pretty good person, a talented agrarian, no sense of graft or corruption or of cheating anyone is portrayed by Jesus as a fool.

The part of the parable that I love is the part where he talks to his own soul. He says, "I will say to my soul, Soul you have ample goods stored up for many years, relax, eat drink and be merry."

At the soul level, deep within himself the farmer is lost, it is his possessions, the abundance of a harvest that he sees sustaining them not the grace of God. In classical Christian thought the soul receives its life from God and gives this life into the mind and body and world. The soul is meant to live not by possession but by flow. This is the real problem with greed, it constricts the flow of grace within the soul and thereby impoverishes the person.

The story ends surprisingly, with God showing up, the deus ex machine.

*You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And all the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*

One cannot hold onto life. One's life does not consist in one's possessions.

The story ends with a moral lesson, you can store up for yourselves treasures thinking that they will give you life. But this way of thinking and acting goes against the grain of the life you really want. It makes one tight and brittle and fearful.

But Jesus says that there is another way, this other way is described as being "rich toward God."

Now that is a beautiful phrase, "rich toward God."

In an infuriating way, Jesus does not spell out what "rich toward God" really means.

But I think we can talk about it; I think that this is the discussion that we as people curious about Jesus ought to be having. What does it mean to be rich toward God?

*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God"*  
(Luke 12: 21).

Rich towards God, that is the goal not riches themselves. This is the problem with the young man who is concerned about his inheritance, he lacks a richness in the things of God. Our use of money is meant to flow out of our living relationship with God not displace it. Remember that troubling word idolatry. Perhaps that is why we are so reluctant to talk about money or so uncomfortable about allowing money and religion to be in conversation together.

If we weren't so protective and secretive about our financial lives, God could actually get ahold of us and our money and then what would happen? Money might lose some of its control and power over us. I think that is what all of us actually fear is that if God gets ahold of us, I mean really gets ahold of us, we will have to let go of the things that control us and that we hold onto for safety and security. We know good and well that God wants all of us, but there are parts that we are willing to surrender only with great difficulty. And to put it simply, those are the parts, the one's we are holding onto for dear life, that are most likely to keep us impoverished in the things of God, and that is to be foolish indeed.

The simple truth is that you are more than you possess. You are not just your body, you're more than what you have or own or can purchase.

Perhaps it's become cliché to ask this question about what you would do if you knew you only had one month to live or one month until the world ended? While most of us probably don't have a plan formulated for this extreme situation, we would mostly likely not worry about sex, success, status, degrees, notoriety, or new stuff. No, you know what you would do? You would spend time with as many people as you could and tell them one or all of these things: "I'm sorry," "I love you," or "I forgive you." That is my guess about what you and I would do if we knew we had limited time. That is what life is really about. That's what the church calls the Kingdom of God: to live now what matters forever.

So, Jesus' parable that seems like one of judgment for the jilted younger son is really one of grace. Jesus is trying to invite us into the freedom of the kingdom – inviting us to live today your final state of affairs. "Live now what matters in eternity," that is Jesus' message. Live on earth what is happening in heaven for that is to be rich towards God.