

Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out in Faith.

Pentecost 8

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“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Jesus said. A man who was in the crowd hearing Jesus, asked Jesus to intervene in a dispute between him and his brother who may have refused to share the family inheritance. This story highlights for me the fact that fights between families over inheritance isn’t a new phenomenon. In that same way is greed not a new phenomenon. There’s always the desire to take more than what is required and even what we need.

Jesus uses the opportunity to share a parable about a rich man who was blessed with an amazing harvest. He looked at the harvest and wondered what he was to do with them. Notice the language of the rich man ‘I will pull down my barns and build new ones and I will say to my soul, you have ample goods stored up for you, eat, drink and be merry.’

There’s no doubt that farming is tough business, and farming in ancient times was brutal. It took a lot to till the land, to plant and to watch your plants grow to harvest time. Sometimes these plants get destroyed by nature or even animals. But for this year, the rich man had made good harvest. He didn’t have to worry about any losses. He sees the harvest and cannot believe what has just happened. He had more than he thought he would ever have.

In his monologue, the rich man simply thought about himself, spoke to himself, planned for himself and stored the goods for himself. Everything was about him. What that the rich in ancient times didn’t have to do any of the hard labor. They paid others to do the hard work. But the distressing part of the monologue was that the rich man had totally forgotten about the laborers who tilled the land and planted the crops, watch the crops grow and secured the harvest. Shouldn’t they get any bonus? They should. But that isn’t what is going on here. The rich man isn’t thinking about those

who bore the brunt of the labor on the farm. To him, they are insignificant and do not deserve to share in the plentiful harvest.

This is the danger with wealth or greed, it blinds us to the point where we can no longer see anyone but ourselves. We lose sight of those who have real needs. It limits our vision for ourselves and others. The fact is, to see anyone other than yourself is to embrace the divine part of you which believes in the words of ancient philosopher Seneca when he says “There is no enjoying the possession of anything valuable unless one has someone to share it with.” Interestingly, to have someone to share with is what brings value to any possession.

There’s a story of a lady who asked an old street vendor ‘How much do you sell your eggs for?’ The old man replied, ‘50 cents an egg, madam.’ The lady said to the old, an ‘I will take 6 eggs for \$2 or I am leaving.’ The old man said ‘But them at the price you want madam. This is a good start for me, because I haven’t sold a single egg today.’ She bought the eggs at a bargain price and left with the feeling that she had won. Later that day, she went to a fancy restaurant with a friend. She and her friend ordered what they wanted. But they barely ate their food. The bill was \$150. The ladies gave him \$200 and asked the owner of the restaurant to keep the change as a tip. This story may have seen quite normal to the owner but quite unfair to the poor egg seller. The question this raises is, why do we always need to show that we have power when we buy from the needy and why are we generous to those who don’t even need our generosity?

There’s a story about a father who used to buy goods from poor people at a high price, even though he didn’t need the thing. Sometimes he paid more for them. His children were amazed and one day they asked him, “Why do you do this, dad?” The father replied, “It is charity wrapped in dignity.”

Like the rich fool, we know nothing about charity wrapped in dignity because we want to control everything. And because we have managed convinced ourselves that there is no god, it means there are no boundaries neither are there any limits to our greed.

The psalmist says is better when he says, ‘The fool has said in his heart that there is no god.’ And if there is no god, what obligations do I have to be rich towards you or towards this god? None!

But liberating fact about believing in God is that it frees us from believing in anything else-even ourselves. For all things, except God, is provisional. That is why Ecclesiastics chooses to call them vanity-meaning they are temporary.

For me, it is the deep sense of the awareness of the divine that creates in me the an obligation that I owe to anyone. I know I owe you a duty and that tempers any desire on my part to take advantage of you. It is the expansion of God's vision for you.

A deep reflection on the gospel story tells me that the point Jesus seeks to make is not about the rejection of the desire for more as a means to our happiness. We all want or desire for more. But the question is, what are we sacrificing in our desire to have more? Who are we abusing in our desire for more? Who are we trampling on as we aim for more? Is the more that we want reflect a desire to place our beliefs in what we possess or is it is a means to share that more with others? Listen to Socrates, "The secret of happiness, you see, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less."

To enjoy less is to embrace the idea that greed does not satisfy, nor does the acquisition of more secure any satisfaction. What satisfies is the noble idea of contentment-that I don't need more to thrive.

I like to share something funny. I heard about this family who lived in the woods in the country. They never left their little town and never watched TV. One day. They took a vacation to New York City. Whiles in the city, they found themselves in the famous skyscraper. They were so impressed and especially intrigued by the elevator. They didn't know what it was.

Whiles curiously watching the elevator, an elderly woman walked up, pushed a button and walls opened. She stepped into a little room and the walls closed.

They stood there contemplating what they've just seen. In a few minutes, the walls opened back up and this beautiful 24 year old girl stepped out.

Almost in disbelief, the son said, 'Dad, what just happened? 'I don't know what happened son, but just go get your mom.'

Part of the reason this rich man was deemed a fool was because he thought that everything was about him. Part of the reason Jesus offered this response was that the man who came to Jesus also felt that everything was about him.

The danger we face, what I often refer to as life's slippery slope, is the tendency to believe that everything is about us or ought to be about us—we are so blinded by our desire for everything to be about us to the point where we cannot even tell when we are being greedy, condescending and outright dismissive of those who would actually cherish the little that we spare for them.

A few weeks ago, a Chaplain friend shared with me a tragic story about a young man who visited his grandmother at a continuing care facility in Woodbridge, Virginia. Unbeknownst to both the grandmother and the mother, this young man had a knife with him. The young man had not been happy with the grandmother over what she left for him in her will. During their conversation, the young man pulled out a knife, and stabbed the grandmother. The mother calls 911. When the police appeared, they asked this young man to drop the knife. And when he refused, they shot him dead.

I don't know how the old lady made her money, but whatever she planned to gift to her grandson was a gift. He didn't have any right to that money. It was a gift. Every inheritance is a gift. The rich man's harvest was a gift. And strangely enough our inheritance as children of God is a gift to us. And because every inheritance or harvest is a gift, we have to approach it with the mindset that we didn't deserve it in the first place. It has been freely given to us and our obligation is to ensure that no matter how difficult it is, we desire to make others benefit from that gift as well.

To take this approach, is to be rich towards God. But Paul uses a different language, which is, to set your mind on things that are above—for that is the only way we can disentangle ourselves from being consumed with the greed that pervades, rules our lives and destroys the lives of others.

F.M. Alexander, an Australian actor once said "People do not decide their futures, they decide their habits, and their habits decide their futures." So, if you develop the habit of setting your mind on things that are above or be rich towards God, you will come to realize that there is more to life than the possessions we acquire. There is more to life than the things which offer us some semblance of power, happiness and status, but in truth they do not. There is more to life than anything you can

imagine-and your liberation moment is the day you realize that life isn't about you and ought not to be about you.

Amen.