

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, August 1, 2010.

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Luke 12:13-21

It is sometimes said that one person's trash is another person's treasure. Bad news for one is good news for another. Take, for example, the phrase, "It's raining." In the middle of a drought this is wonderful. Last fall when week after week of rain kept us from paving our parking lot, it was not so positive. When someone says, "I'm pregnant," that could be extremely joyful news or perhaps troubling, depending on who says it. Try this one from today's Gospel: "One's life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." This is good news if you have nothing but may be hard to hear for those of us whose attentions are often focused on our belongings.

Jesus speaks these words about life and possessions in response to someone in the crowd who has asked Jesus to arbitrate a dispute over inheritance. Who is this person in the crowd? Likely it is someone poor, for a rich person would have means and status to have a real judge settle the dispute. Likely, it is someone desperate, desperate enough to ask a wandering teacher for advice. The person is desperate, because an inheritance in those days would have meant more than just some extra money. It would have included land, perhaps a few animals too; in other words, the means by which a poor person could feed, clothe, house, and support themselves and a family. To be denied a portion of the inheritance could mean facing extreme poverty.

Jesus refuses to intervene in the dispute, but he does offer the person some encouraging advice: "Be on your guard against greed, for one's life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." We might think that this is not very comforting, given the person's desperate situation. But in a time when many if not most people lived and died poor, Jesus' words are reassuring. No matter what happens, he comforts, even if you have nothing, your life is not measured by your poverty. Even if you are poor, you still have a life.

Those of us who have never experienced real poverty may have trouble hearing the comfort in Jesus' words. We may have trouble, because we are more like the rich fool in the parable Jesus tells. Many of us have more than we need, more than enough. Like the fool who needs extra storage space for his surplus goods, we have also torn down our barns, literally or figuratively, in order to build bigger ones. We have sold small houses and cars and plots of land in order to get bigger ones in order to make room for more and more and more. We have taken comfort in our surpluses and often forgotten to give thanks to God. We hear God speaking to the rich man: "You fool!" and we hear it being said to ourselves. We are fools. We have been tempted and misled by greed, by the desire for more, by the illusion that our stuff can save us from hardship and make us uncomfortable. The good news that "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" sounds like bad news if we have spent much of our life working for, maintaining, and seeking more stuff.

What is enough? In this country, the government considers someone poor if they make less than \$30 a day (that's roughly \$10,800 per year). In other places, such a person would be considered rich. We can and do spend a lot of time, individually and as a society, trying to figure out what it means to have "enough." Jesus, on the other hand, seems less interested in getting into the numbers. Jesus refuses to intervene in the inheritance dispute, refuses to attend to the poor person's dilemma in practical terms. Instead he offers the advice that greed is dangerous, and life is more than things. The best news comes at the end of the parable of the rich fool, when

Jesus says, “so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God.” Rather than tell the crowd what the rich man should have done or tell them how to divide the family inheritance, Jesus gives this simple advice, “Be rich toward God.”

Jesus' response reminds me of a story I heard once about a wise desert monk named Abba Poemen (Father Poemen). One of the other monks comes to Abba Poemen and says, “An inheritance has been left me. What should I do?” Abba Poemen tells him to come back in three days. The young brother returns and the old monk tells him, “What can I say to you, brother? If I tell you to give it to the church, they will make banquets with it; if I tell you to give it to your relations, you will not receive any profit from it; if I tell you to give it to the poor, you will not do it. Do as you like; it is none of my business.” The old monk knows that practical advice is often unheeded or will result in other problems. He refuses to give any. But at the same time, the same Abba Poemen was heard to have said, “Do you give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart.” The rich fool tried to feed his soul with grain and goods stored in barns. What satisfies our hearts most is God. Be rich toward God.

We are tempted to rack our brains and worry ourselves about what is enough, pouring over budgets and debating decisions about whether to keep something or get rid of it. We hear what Jesus says elsewhere about “sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor” and we think, “I'm never going to do that, but what can I do?” Articles and books abound about how to get rid of clutter and simplify your life. These are not bad impulses. But instead of beginning with worrying about our over-abundance and what to do with it, perhaps we might start by worrying about how abundant, how rich we are toward God? Are we giving enough to God? How can we set aside time for God: in worship, in study, in prayer? How can we dedicate the works of our minds and our hands to God's glory instead of our own? In other words, how can we make work worship? How can we give thanks for what we have instead of worry about what we have? I suspect that the richer we are toward God, the easier it will be for us to see clearly what “enough” means. The richer we are toward God, the less anxious we will be about our things and about sharing what we have with others.

I love the stories of the ancient desert monks, because these men and women, these desert fathers and mothers were abundantly rich toward God. They gave it all, thus they were able to live quite richly with barely anything at all. One more story which shows how being rich toward God can help us deal with possessions is about Abbot Anastasius. The abbot, the head of a desert monastery, had a Bible, a complete copy of the Old and New Testaments. In that time, the 3rd century or so, such a book would have been considered very valuable. One of the brothers came to visit the old monk and secretly stole his Bible. Later the abbot realized the book was missing but made no inquiry for fear that the younger brother would lie about his sin. The brother took the Bible to a nearby city to sell it and named a price. The buyer said to the brother, “Let me borrow the book so that I may have it appraised by an expert.” The buyer went to Abbot Anastasius, who was indeed an expert in these matters, showed him the book, and asked if it was worth as much as the brother had said. “Yes,” said Anastasius, it is a very fine book and worth that much.” The buyer met the younger monk later and said, “I had the book appraised by Abbot Anastasius, and he says it is a fine book and worth as much as you asked.” The monk tried to hide his alarm and asked, “Is that all he said? Did he mention anything else about the book?” “No,” said the buyer. The young monk took the book and said, “I have changed my mind and won't be selling the book after all.” Then he hurried back to Abbot Anastasius and begged him with tears to please take back the Bible. The Abbot told him to go in peace and even offered the book as a gift. But the monk cried even more, “I will never have peace if you don't take back the book.” In the end, the young monk came and stayed with the Abbot for the rest of his life.”

We may not be ready to be as rich toward God or our neighbor as Abbot Anastasius. Perhaps we can be inspired by his richness, which was inspired by the richness of Christ. When

we are rich toward God, as much as we are able, I believe we will find that we are less concerned with the things we have. We will hear it as good news that our lives do not consist in an abundance of possessions. We may even be able to share that news and share what we have, so that all may have enough.