

**Proper 13C – We’re Here Not to Accumulate but to Do**

Luke 12:13-21 – St. John’s, Salisbury

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My email program has been doing an increasingly good job of diverting that awful junk mail called “spam.” But an interesting piece slipped through awhile back that caught my attention because of the subject matter of today’s gospel. It was a solicitation from a law firm, clearly unaware that I was no longer practicing law, asking for referrals of cases involving disputes between heirs. *Well*, I thought.... *too bad!* It’s a good deal too late to refer the feuding brothers in today’s reading to the firm.... Conversely, I doubt it would mean much to the members of that law firm to refer them to today’s Gospel.

But it does remind us that such disputes are part of the human condition, just as much today as in Jesus’ day. Indeed, the Bible is clear that feuding between brothers has existed since the day Cain first became jealous of Abel. Things certainly were no better between Jacob and Esau or Joseph and *his* brothers. So we know that jealousy between siblings is not unique to *our* family – or even to our culture.

But that these two brothers had such a dispute, given the rigidity of the rules for the distribution of property set out in the Torah, was considered unseemly at best. When the first distribution of property was made after the Israelites entered the Promised Land, eleven of the twelve tribes got land. The twelfth, the Levites, were to be cared for by all the others in exchange for their giving their lives to religious service. The general understanding in the distribution was that what was apportioned would be sufficient for everyone’s need and would continue to suffice for their descendants as well. The ancient Middle East was an agrarian society, of course, with limited resources. In such a society, someone who got property that was not properly his was deemed to be greedy and unworthy. In fact, there was an inherent suspicion of *anyone* wealthy, since anything he had above purely personal need must have come from somewhere – and *someone* – else. The idea was that if someone has gained, someone else must surely have lost. St. Jerome, the man who produced the Latin translation of scripture used by the Church for a millennium, expressed that viewpoint perfectly: “Every rich person,” he said, “is a thief or the heir of a thief.”

Both Colossians and Luke today deal with essentially the same theme. The reading from Colossians counsels us to set our minds on things that are above, to put to death whatever in us is earthly, including greed, which it calls....*idolatry*. And in the Gospel reading, before he tells the feuding brothers the parable about the rich fool, Jesus says: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

With that background, let’s look now at the story that Jesus tells in response to the request that he intervene in the dispute. He tells of a man who is a landowner, whose land not only produces more than he can use; it produces more than he can even store. So what does he want to do about this situation? Help other folks who are in less fortunate circumstances

perhaps? No, what he wants to do is to tear down his barn so that he can build a bigger one and wallow in his good fortune – to eat, drink, and be merry! It is clearly a dramatic understatement to say that God is not pleased. “You fool!” says he. You’re dying tonight. Then who’ll get to enjoy all those crops?

Why ever is God so angry in this story? There has been no suggestion that the rich man has done anything evil or illegal to anyone else. He cheated no one in the story, despite prevailing suspicions about people in his circumstances. In fact, he might even be entitled to view this extra good crop as a gift *from* God... Well, more often than not, the story serves the preacher as a sort of pre-stewardship season opportunity to talk about the importance of generosity and charity. Indeed, one may well wonder why the man can think of no better use for his good fortune than to lie about in self-indulgence. Whatever else one may think of Bill Gates, it’s worth noting that the largest charitable trust in the world is the *Gates Foundation*; so we may well ask why the rich farmer here didn’t spread *his* good fortune around a bit..... Even if he kept only what would fit in his current barn, he, like Bill Gates, would still have plenty for himself. Although this is not a bad way to read the parable, I think that there’s another – deeper – way to read it as well.

But let me leave you with that observation for just a couple of minutes while I tell you another parable – this one from a short story by late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup>-century novelist Henry James. Though it’s not on the same scale as *Portrait of a Lady* or *Wings of the Dove*, it’s still surely one of his most powerful works. *The Beast in the Jungle* tells the story of the ironically named John Marcher, who has, from the earliest age, had the strongest sense that his life has been kept for something extraordinary, something rare but, perhaps, overwhelming and terrible. His feeling is so strong, indeed, and so scary, that he has shared his premonition with only one other person in the world, the lovely young May Bartram, with whom he continues a pleasant, though superficial, relationship throughout their lives, daring not to commit himself to her in any intimate way for fear of his tragic expectation coming true, and the pain he should feel at the loss of his love. So they live their lives, not as lovers, but as friends only. They see one another almost every day, dining together often, or going to the theater, or just sitting and chatting. They grow old together, and, then, May sickens and eventually dies, leaving Marcher wistfully regretting what had never existed between them – a love that transcends friendship. One day he visits the cemetery where his friend has been buried and there he sees another man, clearly distraught from the pain of a lost love. And he asks himself: “What had the man *had*, to make him by the loss of it, so bleed and yet live? No passion had ever touched *him*...” (That is, Marcher himself.) *He* had merely maundered and pined. “The fate he had been marked for,” he finally realizes, “he had met, with a vengeance – he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened.” “The escape,” Marcher tells himself too late, “would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived. She had lived – who could say now with what passion? – since she had loved him for himself; whereas he had never thought of *her*...but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use.”

There we have our two parables – one from Luke, one from Henry James; one apparently about money and property, one about love and commitment. But they also both teach a core

value, selflessness, that is very much, ultimately, also about our relationship with God, and therefore about prayer.

So why *do* we pray? Certainly it is to speak with God – to take time away from the various activities and distractions that life is made up of. But to what end? We can be asking for help – what is called intercessory prayer – for ourselves or for others. We engage in such prayer every Sunday during the Prayers of the People, and all of us, whatever other prayer we may bring to God, at some point in our lives, when facing an exam, or a biopsy, or an interview with a boss, or any number of other possible circumstances, are likely to turn to God for support – you know the form of prayer I mean; I know I’ve said something like it, or at least thought it more than once – “If only this *one* time, Lord, I promise (you can fill in the blank). I’ll go to church every week. I’ll never eat chocolate again. I’ll never touch another drop. Whatever! We can, however, use this sort of prayer for more altruistic purposes as well – the recovery of a loved one; the victims of flood or earthquake, or war; peace or racial harmony. There are any number of things for which we can pray that are of an external nature. Some are clearly worthy of our prayer life, though they are useful also as reminders that if we pray for something, we surely bear some responsibility to help it come about in whatever great or small way we may be capable of.

But there is another purpose, as well, to prayer – to transform *ourselves* – to bring us to a richer knowledge of God and of his will and purpose for us, and thus to bring us closer to *him*, not *him* to us. It’s the sort of prayer we see in the various New Testament stories about Jesus taking time to go off alone by himself and pray. You know his famous words found later in Luke’s Gospel: “Not *my* will,” he says, “but *yours* be done!” Both forms of prayer are consistent with today’s parables. We surely want to know God’s mind and his desire for us.

To exercise our own Christian priesthood – for we all became priests at our baptism – we need to put *God’s* will first. To learn that will we can look in two places. We can look within – in prayer. And we can look at the life of our savior Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. You may have heard of the Eastern tradition of praying without ceasing. Jesus’ life was an illustration of that principle. Though he went away from time to time for prayer, his very involvement in the lives of those who needed him, no matter how marginal they may have been (a Roman centurion, a Syro-Phoenician woman, lepers), even giving his life for those who would desert him at his death, was itself a profound form of prayer bringing him ever more perfectly into unity with his Father’s will.

And so.... Even as Jesus, our great high priest, may we *also* live into *our* priesthood as we seek to make our prayers and our lives *both* more perfect expressions of God’s will and purpose for *us*. AMEN