

“Life’s True Treasure”

by Tim Hall

8th Sunday After Pentecost, Year C - 4 August 2019

Hosea 11:1–11, Psalm 107:1-9, 43, Colossians 3:1–11, Luke 1:13–21

“God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, reflecting this parable tells us to “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: [including] greed (which is idolatry).” ... rather ... “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

Much later, Kahlil Gibran, early 20th century Lebanese-American poet who emigrated to the U.S. as a young boy with his mother and best known for his book “The Prophet”, interprets it this way: “Cast aside those who liken godliness to whimsy and who try to combine their greed for wealth with their desire for a happy afterlife.”

Or, as one online clean-joke site says...

There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel hears his plea and appears to him. "Sorry, but you can't take your wealth with you." The man implores the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules.

The man continues to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappears and informs the man that God has decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathers his largest suitcase and fills it with pure gold bars and places it beside his bed.

Soon afterward the man dies and shows up at the Gates of Heaven to greet St. Peter. St. Peter seeing the suitcase says, "Hold on, you can't bring that in here!"

But, the man explains to St. Peter that he has permission and asks him to verify his story with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checks and comes back saying, "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through."

St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, "You brought pavement?!!!"

What’s one of the main points that Jesus was getting at when he told the parable of “The Rich Fool” to the huge crowd that had gathered around him in another village as he made his final journey to Jerusalem? It’s not our stuff that matters, it’s our relationships. Our relationship with God and, through being rich toward God, our relationships with each other, with our fellow travelers, with every creature here in the Kingdom of God on earth.

We’ve been working our way through many parables and bible stories with Jesus this summer as he makes his way to Jerusalem, with disciples and crowd in tow. Three weeks ago we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, and as the lead in to that parable says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” And we learn that a true neighbor is not the one that passes by on the other side but rather, the one who shows mercy. And we are to go and do likewise.

And then, two weeks ago, when Jesus visited the house of Martha and Mary, we hear again of a different way to approach life. You remember... Martha is busying herself preparing the house and the meal for Jesus and his entourage while Mary is lounging at the feet of Jesus listening to what he is saying. Martha, in her exhaustion, finally explodes and demands that Jesus tell Mary to help her. Again, Jesus turns the request on its side and invites Martha to join them, for the better part is to listen to our Lord and not be distracted by our many tasks.

And here we are this morning... A man approaches Jesus and asks him to arbitrate a dispute he is having with his brother about an inheritance. This man's request may seem a bit odd at first glance. Why would Jesus be asked a legal question? Jesus has been teaching about our spiritual well-being and all this man can think about are his worldly possessions. It's shocking to me. I see this man not so much seeking humbly Jesus' help as would be best for him but rather ordering Jesus to meet his selfish desires.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!”

And of course, as so often happens when you tell Jesus what you want him to do for you, the answer is not what you might expect. Jesus opts out of getting involved in the familial squabble over property. Instead, he uses it as an opportunity to talk about money – and more importantly, a right relationship with money.

Jesus tells a story about a man who became wealthy by the sweat of his brow, by honest means. He was a farmer and his land had produced prodigiously. And at first glance, his decision to save for the future by building bigger barns doesn't sound too unreasonable either; after all, he does need space for his abundant harvest, right? What's wrong with saving for a rainy day?

The truth is there's nothing wrong with saving for a rainy day. The foolishness of this man isn't in his plan to build bigger barns. His spiritual illness isn't inherently about his wealth or even his ambition – it's in how he relates to it.

Notice the inner dialog this man has with himself:

“What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

Or in this modern-day, American existence, we might say, “What should I do, for I don't have enough space to store all my stuff? I need to build a bigger house with a bigger garage for all my televisions, video games, jewelry, cars, bicycles, motorbikes, jet skis, etc.” You get the idea. You've probably seen the bumper sticker with a phrase coined by Malcolm Forbes... “He who dies with the most toys wins.” Is this really the way we want to live our lives?

Here is part of this rich man's, and sometimes our own, spiritual illness: it's all about the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. There are no references at all to others– not to family or friends, and certainly no references to God. He is under the mistaken belief that all this wealth is his: his possession, his to control, and that he alone produced this wealth.

The other delusion that distorts this man's relationship with his wealth is uncovered when God addresses him: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

In the face of the stark reality of death, the truth is revealed: No amount of wealth or possessions can save you from your own mortality. You will die, and nothing on this earth can prevent death. Your possessions are temporal and are not of ultimate worth. They will not save you.

As Christians, we are called to shift our focus away from the small, egocentric self and outward into a radical trust in God. When our focus moves outward in this way, we begin to view our wealth very differently. First, we realize that it isn't our wealth at all – it all belongs to God. Not only has our wealth come from God, even our own talents by which we are able to obtain our wealth are gifts from God. None of it belongs to us – it's all on loan.

The Rich Fool hasn't figured out that the wealth he claims isn't really his, he only has temporary custody of it. To put it into today's context, we might ponder exactly how much Bill Gates or Warren Buffett will be worth when they die. The answer is: the same as you and me. Death is the great equalizer, and when we die, our net worth in dollars is zero.

The second thing we realize is predicated on the first: If all comes from God, then we have an obligation to God to use this wealth in right ways. This realization moves us from being consumers of resources to stewards of God's good gifts. We begin to ask different questions about the use of wealth: "Do I really need this? Or is it a want I can live without?" "Where can I best use my money for everyone's benefit?" "How can my wealth be a blessing?"

It doesn't mean that our personal needs will be left out of the equation, but it does mean that we will balance personal needs with the needs of others and the environment, promoting healthy and holy relationships to bring glory to God.

So Jesus' teaching is not a condemnation of wealth or ambition; rather it is an invitation to view our material possessions differently. Can our wealth and possessions help us live a relatively comfortable life? **Of course they can.** Can they make us confident that we are worthy of God's love and guarantee us right relationships with God and each other? **Absolutely not!**

Jesus' warning is against covetousness. That could mean wanting more than our share at the expense of others, while others suffer severe want and homelessness.

Scan the teachings of Jesus and we see it is the very opposite of the earthly desires Paul warns us against that Jesus implores us to pursue. Things such as compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and above all love.

Christ invites us into a life greater than our anxious fears over things that have no ultimate worth or the pursuit of greater wealth at the expense of others. He invites us into deeper relationship with God and with others – through genuine and generous sharing and caring – a treasure far greater and more enduring.

That is being rich toward God. Life's true treasure is found in what we value, as long as we value God by seeking him and valuing each other. This we can take with us when we die.

Sermon Prayer: Generous God, in abundance you give us things both spiritual and physical. Help us to hold lightly the fading things of this earth and grasp tightly the lasting things of your kingdom, so that what we are and do and say may be our gifts to you through Christ, who beckons all to seek the things above, where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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