

**Year C: Proper 13a Hosea 11:1-11; Ps 107:1-9, 43; Col 3:1-11; Lk 12:13-21
St. Barnabas, Florissant – August 04, 2019**

Focus Sentence: When was the last time you heard a sermon about greed?

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In preparing for this morning's sermon, I was struck by one particular sentence in Paul's Letter to the Colossians: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." I'm fairly certain that, particularly if you come from a more evangelical religious tradition, you've heard LOTS of sermons about fornication, impurity, passion, and evil desire. In fact, over the past several years, while the Episcopal Church was wrestling with the question of whether committed gay people should be ordained, or married in the church, and so on, a fair number of sermons have been preached in our denomination on that catalog of earthly sins.

I wonder, though, when you consider which sins really cause the most harm in our society, when was the last time you heard a sermon on greed?

Well, this morning, you're going to hear one!

PAUSE

With stunning irrelevancy, a voice calls out to the rabbi from the back of the crowd, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!" I say, "stunning irrelevancy," because you have to wonder if this person has even been listening to the words of Jesus.

But, no, this person has somehow come to the conclusion that this Jesus is a wise person and, like other rabbis, Jesus can be sought out as an arbitrator and probate judge. He knows that he can't, or won't, confront his brother on this issue,so get the rabbi to intervene.

These opening verses in this morning's passage from Luke's Gospel might well remind us of a similar request made to Jesus in a story we heard some two weeks ago -- when Martha, busy and distracted by trying to be the perfect hostess, demands of Jesus, "Tell my sister to help me in the kitchen."

I'm sure that an entire sermon could be preached on the need for each one of us to take ownership and responsibility for our own situations, and then to act upon them, but that's not the message I want to reflect upon this morning.

PAUSE

Throughout the Gospels, we see a familiar pattern repeated. Someone comes to Jesus with a question, with a particular request. "Is it lawful to do this or that?" Jesus doesn't give a specific answer to the question, but instead changes the question.

And the change Jesus makes is always in a particular direction. Jesus deepens and extends the question, from the specific to a deeper principle, which the questioner doesn't yet realize is the real issue.

The commandment says we are to do no murder. Jesus takes that and shifts it to the *motivations* that produce murder, to the hatreds and resentments that are the source of betrayal and violence. And, in like manner, Jesus does it here.

Jesus moves from the specific issue of dividing a family inheritance to the inner and much deeper issue of greed and covetousness. And, once again, Jesus uses a parable to get to this deeper issue.

PAUSE

The parable of the rich, we might say "successful", man, who builds ever bigger barns in which to store his bumper crops of grain, is often called the parable of the rich fool, and it's one which just might have something to say to us rich Americans.

Like the rich, or successful, man, our country and our human talent has produced abundantly. And, like the man in the parable, we too seek to have ample goods laid up for many years. All we really want are good investments, some IRA's, a place at the lake where we can retire and enjoy our golden years without fear of being dependent on anyone. Does this desire make us "FOOLS"?

PAUSE

Well, we've all heard the warnings about the need to plan ahead for retirement, or about making sure we have something put aside for our children's education. Is there anything wrong with that? Isn't that simple prudence and common sense?

In Luke's story, it says that the land produced abundantly: apparently, the right mix of rain and sunshine and fertile land, and (no doubt) hard work has produced very good results. And simple prudence dictates that adequate barns should be built for crop storage. Next year might not be so good. And there's really nothing wrong with this, there's really nothing wrong with being "RICH". So, what IS the problem here?

The problem seems to lie in that little word, "soul". This rich man, this successful man, has slipped into the illusion of equating material success with spiritual progress. And it's an all-too-common illusion.

"We Americans are prosperous; therefore, God has blessed us. And if God has blessed us, then it must be as a reward for our lives." The logic of this so-called "prosperity gospel" might seem irrefutable, but unfortunately, it's quite wrong.

To ask a question which we're realizing more and more these days on a social and international, as well as on a personal scale --- at what COST has this prosperity come into our lives, or into our organization, or into our nation? Who suffers because of our success?

PAUSE

In recent years, we've heard any number of news stories about Wall Street bankers, CEO's of large corporations, and so on, who are earning hundreds of millions of dollars. We might also be aware of Bill Gates, the chairman of Microsoft, who is reputed to be worth over \$72 billion! By the way, that is allegedly equal to the combined wealth of the least well-off 40% of all Americans.

In recent years, we've also heard news stories about countries in Africa or Latin America, where a very UNHAPPY mix of weather and other circumstances has produced yet another famine. Thousands have died in those countries. And, even here in America, it's reported that over 20% of our children go to bed hungry every night.

In addition, we Americans might do well to reflect often on the fact that we represent some 4% of the world's population and, yet, we consume some 20% of the world's resources!

PAUSE

It's certainly not our place to judge individuals, billionaires or otherwise (and I DO know that Bill Gates, for one, is very much a philanthropist), but I really think it's important for us all, and particularly for us Americans, to continually ask those questions: "At what cost, to ourselves and to others, has this prosperity come? Who suffers because of our success?"

PAUSE

Quite apart from the issue of cost, the mistake our rich landowner has made, and one which we all frequently make, is to consider his possessions the ultimate measure and value of his life. American culture certainly pushes us into making this mistake. Advertising constantly trumpets the message in subtle, or not-so-subtle, ways that we've really "GOT IT MADE", we've really succeeded, when we at last drive this particular car, or wear this particular perfume, when we live in this particular neighborhood, or when we upgrade to this particular latest smartphone.

Another news story we see from time to time is the one showing thousands of (often poorer) Americans lining up to buy Powerball tickets (when the payoff gets especially high). The odds against winning are ONLY 80million:1, but...”I’d have it made for life!”

PAUSE

Possessions in themselves aren’t evil. In fact, they can be used responsibly and for much good. The problem only arises when, like the rich man, we become so focused on their accumulation that they become an end in themselves. When that happens, we lose sight of God, and of our fellow human creatures. We once again fall into the sin of idolatry (as Paul warned his Colossian Christians.)

PAUSE

The rich man thinks to HIMSELF, he says to HIMSELF. The rich man fails to pray, fails to consider God. He sets up his possessions as his idol, and he certainly fails to think about anyone beyond himself.

But what does God say? God says to him, “You FOOL! This very night your life is being demanded of you! Of what use are all these things you’ve prepared, that you’ve set aside for your supposed security?” The Psalms tell us that a FOOL is someone who says to himself, “There is no God”, and it’s no accident that Jesus uses the word, FOOL, to describe this person who has forgotten everything but himself, who lives for himself alone, as if indeed there is no God.

Living as if there is no God, living as if there were no one to answer to beyond myself and my desires, that’s ultimately what makes me a FOOL in God’s eyes.

Fortunately, Jesus provides an alternative. Jesus reminds each of us that real life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. And finally, Jesus calls each of us to be “rich toward God”. Rich in our response of faith and, more importantly, being rich enough to use our possessions in accordance with that faith, which means being able to share them with others rather than accumulating them for one’s self alone.

That might well be FOOLish in the world's eyes, but pray that God may help each of us to be that kind of fool instead of the other!

AMEN