

The Best Things Are Not Things

Luke 12:13-21

August 5, 2007

I.

Jesus spoke today's Gospel to first century Palestinians, but it also speaks to twenty-first century Americans. The story of the rich man, with his wealth and bountiful crops, and his need for even bigger barns, in many ways describes the consumer society in which we live today.

This story, however, is not only is a story about wealth, but also a story about how our possessions can get in the way of our relationship with God. This Gospel shines the spotlight on the tension between having things and having faith.

And it's important to understand that Jesus did not condemn wealth. He did not criticize what we understand as the American dream. But he does show the folly of being so self-absorbed in the temporary security our material things that we seem to forget about the eternal security that only God can provide.

The point of this story is that the rich man saw only part of the picture. He thought he was set for the future, but he didn't understand that he had no future and had made no plans for that. The way in which he wanted to live completely overshadowed the purposes for which God wanted him to live.

Therein lies the challenge for all of us. We know that God wants us to prosper and be happy. But he also wants to have a relationship with us. How can we do both? As the Gospel tells us, it's a matter of priorities. We are called to put God first, and then all else will follow.

I try to read bumper stickers if I can. They often condense a paragraph of thought into a few words. And I can think of two bumper stickers that clearly define the choices in today's reading. They also are book titles. The first, which was born of the excesses of the 1970's said "whoever dies with the most toys wins." You probably have heard that idea expressed a time or two. The other said "the best things in life aren't things." And that gives us a different perspective.

II.

So, with that background, let's look at what happened in today's reading. We have a wealthy farmer whose land had produced more crops that he could handle. There is nothing to suggest that he was an evil or wicked man. Like any wise and prudent individual, he began to plan in advance for what to do about the situation, and he realized he needed to build bigger barns in which to store his abundance.

OK so far. Right? We can relate to that, and we might do the same. But what came next? Then the man basically said "I'm set, I got mine. I'll just take life easy and eat, drink, and be merry." At this moment God's voice boomed from heaven and said "you fool." The man must have looked around to see who else was nearby. The voice could not have been talking to him, could it? He was no fool; he thought he was pretty smart.

But then God's voice continued. God basically said, "yeah, you, I'm talking to you. Your stuff means nothing now because tonight you die."

This reminds me of a story of the funeral of Aristotle Onassis, who died a multi-billionaire, one of the richest men in the world. One person among the mourners turned to a friend and said "I wonder how much he left." The friend said "everything, he left everything, and none of it counts for him now."

Now, I don't know very much about Aristotle Onassis' spiritual life. Perhaps he was a very devout man. But in the end his wealth, like the wealth of the man in today's reading, no longer meant anything.

The point is that our worldly riches are temporary, and the only permanent riches are those we experience with God. We are called to make sure that the temptations of the world do not turn us away from the foundations of our faith.

III.

So how do we live a Christian life in a secular world? It's only natural to think that by making money and buying things we are providing for ourselves and our families. We believe we are taking care of our responsibilities. And that's true, as far as it goes. God wants us to do that. But it can be hard to stop at that point. If we are not careful our blessings can turn into problems. The earthly messages of today's culture are so dominant and overwhelming that we can look right past the godly promises of the kingdom to which we aspire.

For example, and as I have said before, one of the fastest growing service industries in America is self-storage. Storage facilities are springing up everywhere. Just think about that for a moment. Do you think there is self-storage in India, or Africa, or Latin America? Probably not much. But for us, we fill up our houses and don't stop. We keep right on acquiring and paying others to store things we can't use but can't give up either. And I have not been exempt from this in the past. I would speculate that if everyone in America would sell just ten percent of the stuff they have in self storage and give the money to charity, the total would be one of the largest donations in history

And it is not just the older generation. Our kids see what we do and they do the same. As an example, I like to read the comics. I even have some of them sent to my computer because the local papers don't carry some of the strips I used to read in Virginia. One of those strips is about "Opus," a sort of sorry looking penguin who, along with his friends Steve and Bill the Cat, offer some fairly perceptive commentary on contemporary society. For some of you who have read comics for many years, "Opus" at times can be a modern day version of "Pogo."

Well, a few of months ago the "Opus" strip began with a drawing of a teenager lying in distress on the sidewalk with electronic gadgets scattered all around. The next panel revealed that this young man had not been entertained for over twenty minutes. Apparently there had been a massive failure. His Ibook was dead, his Ipod didn't work, his Ipod Nano, his shuffle, his blackberry, his game boy, and his web-browsing, instant-messaging, game-playing musical phone all had been out of service during this time.

The next panel after that showed passers-by trying to help by hooking up an old fashioned desktop computer like the one I still use but, alas, the electrical cord was too short. In a final last-ditch effort to revive him, they put a newspaper in front of him, but that would have required too much effort from the young man. So, in the final panel someone announced the somber news, "we lost him."

The point of both these examples is that it's easy for our possessions to get in the way of our faithfulness. It is easier to put God on the back burner if we think we are self-sufficient and can do everything for ourselves. And this can lead us to deceive ourselves in ways that not only affect us, but also our neighbors and the church. I believe we work to avoid this burden at St. Thomas, but there always is a temptation. So let me once again put up the caution flag in all three areas.

As I already have suggested, we can deceive ourselves with a misplaced emphasis on acquiring material goods and things. We cannot measure our lives by what we have rather than what

we are. If we try to do this we can fall into the trap of storing up our treasures on earth rather than in heaven, and we eventually suffer the consequences.

We also can deceive ourselves with a misplaced emphasis on our own schedules, agendas, and activities with the result that we do not even see the homeless, the needy, and those living on the margins of society who are right around us. If we do not love our neighbors as ourselves, then our less fortunate neighbors also suffer the consequences.

Finally, we can deceive ourselves with a misplaced emphasis on how our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to worship. We can let the enemy lead us into a belief that our own individual piety is sufficient without worrying about building up the community of the faithful. That is exactly what Satan wants; empty churches because people believe they already know all they need to know about God. However, if we minimize our participation in Christian fellowship and discipleship, and if we do not build up the body of Christ, then everyone suffers the consequences.

IV.

So, where is the Good News in today's reading? Where can we find God's grace? The answer is that it's still here and always will be. In the midst of our consumer society the Good News still exists. The Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ transcends societies, transcends economics, and certainly transcends consumerism. God's kingdom is on its way, and nothing we can do in our spending or consumption patterns can affect that reality. The question is: will we live our lives so that we will be ready?

To do that we are called to realize that the problem is not holding our wealth, but rather holding it with clenched hands. And if our hands are wrapped around our wealth, then we have no hands to receive the gifts God has ordained for us. Money is a good servant but a poor master. If we possess our wealth that is one thing. If our wealth possesses us that is another.

And when I speak of wealth, I think we have to acknowledge we all are wealthy for purposes of understanding this reading. The enemy tries to deceive us. He tries to make us compare ourselves with people who have more, not people who have less. He wants to stimulate our selfishness, not our generosity. If we were living in the setting of today's Gospel, however, there is no doubt we would be numbered among those who are well off, not those in need.

As a result, how do we know whether we are bound to material things or not? How do we know if we are rich toward God, as today's Gospel tells us to be? One indicator might be our willingness to share our possessions and wealth. This goes back to that well-known passage from Matthew's Gospel where he told us that where our treasure is, there also will be our hearts. Another indicator could be our participation in Christian worship and fellowship. It is harder to think only of ourselves when we share a community of faith with others.

So, let's try to sum this up. The bottom line is that Christ did not come to make us prosperous, but to make us righteous. He did not call us to affluence but to obedience. While he wants us to be comfortable, he also wants us to be generous. And in that inevitable day when we all must account for the content of our lives, the question will not be, "were we successful," but "were we faithful?" *Amen.*