

Enough Is Enough

Luke 12:13-21

September 12, 2010

I.

Several years ago Public Broadcasting Service ran a special called "Affluenza." The title was invented from the words "affluence" and "influenza." As you might imagine, the program treated the high social and environmental costs of materialism and overconsumption as an illness.

Perhaps not coincidentally, this program appeared shortly after the conclusion of the long-running series, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." And of course we remember how that show featured the extravagant lives of wealthy entertainers, athletes, and business leaders.

Although neither program reflected religious perspectives, both can be points of departure for examining the tensions that are inherent in living a Christian life in a secular world.

Most Christians sincerely believe that by making money and buying things they are caring for themselves and providing their families as God wants. After all, we are told in 1 Timothy that those who do not provide for their families have denied the faith (5:8).

And it also probably is easy to believe that Paul's words elsewhere in 1 Timothy, where he said "the love of money is the root of all evil" (6:10), do not apply to us because we do not actually "love" money. We simply regard it as a necessary medium of exchange so we can enjoy God's creation, support those we love, and be reasonably comfortable. Is that so bad?

No. Not necessarily. It does not have to be a problem, but it can be a problem. We can become poor stewards of the gifts God has given us, and slip from God's ways into the world's ways. If our immune systems are weak we can become infected with "affluenza," an illness that can be harmful to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to the church. Let's see how that might work for each.

We could deceive ourselves with a misplaced emphasis on material goods and the latest in current technologies, fashions, homes, and other luxuries. This could lead us into the trap of storing up treasures on earth rather than in heaven, and we eventually suffer the consequences.

We also could overlook our neighbors by focusing only on ourselves, with the result that we do not even see those living on the margins of society around us. We would not be loving our neighbors as ourselves, and they would suffer the consequences.

And we could constrain the church by treating its support as secondary and something to do only after all of our other perceived needs are satisfied. If we do not return to God a proper share of the blessings God has given to us, the church suffers the consequences.

Bumper stickers get my attention. They often condense a paragraph of thought into a few words. And I recall two bumper stickers that clearly define some of the choices we have today. Both 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 are not things." And that can give us an alternative perspective

II.

So, with that to set the stage, let's look at today's Gospel reading. We have a wealthy farmer whose land had produced more crops than he could handle. There is nothing to suggest he

was an evil or wicked man. And like any wise and prudent person he began to plan what he should do, and realized he needed to build bigger barns in which to store his abundance.

So far so good. This fellow might be in the running for the Farmer of the Year award. And we can relate to his plans to build bigger barns, can't we? In his shoes we might have done the same.

But look at what happened next. Then the man basically said "I'm set, I've got mine. I'll just take life easy and eat, drink, and be merry." In fact, this is a close paraphrase from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, which says, "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (3:13).

But it turned out that instead of Ecclesiastes the farmer should have been reading the Book of Isaiah. There he would have seen where the prophet pointed to the folly of those who reveled in their disobedience of God as they said, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (22:13).

And at that moment God's voice prophetically boomed from heaven and said, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you."

Now, this is a parable so we cannot add much to the story as Jesus told it. But if it had been an actual event we can imagine that the farmer must have looked around to see who else was nearby. Certainly, the voice could not have been talking to him, could it? He was no fool, was he? He thought he was pretty smart.

But then God continued and basically said, "Yeah, you, I'm talking to you. All your stuff means nothing now because tonight you die." And Jesus ended the story by saying, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

So by now we all probably have an idea about how the rest of this sermon is going to go. And of course the point is that our worldly riches are only temporary. The only permanent riches are those we experience with God.

III.

Let's examine that point in a contemporary context. Today instead of building bigger barns many people just rent more storage space. I have used this example in the past. And again, that is not necessarily a bad example. Susan and I had a storage unit when we lived in Virginia.

But the image can be somewhat telling. Self-storage is one of the fastest growing industries in America. We fill up our houses and don't stop. How much self-storage do you think there is in India, or Africa, or Latin America? Probably not much.

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 or to the church, the total would exceed the gifts to any national telethon or similar fund raising event in history.

And it is not just the older generation. Our kids see what we do and they do the same. For example, I like to read the comics. I even read a few of them online because the *Sun Herald* does not carry some of my favorites.

One of those strips, which regrettably ended in 2008, was about "Opus," a sort of sorry looking penguin who, along with his friends Steve and Bill the Cat, offered some fairly perceptive and pithy comments on contemporary society. For some of you who are familiar with really older comic strips, "Opus" at times could be a modern day version of "Pogo."

One of these "Opus" strips began with a drawing of an unconscious teenager lying on his back 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 Ipad was dead, his shuffle didn't work, his blackberry, his game boy, his MP3 player, and his web-browsing, instant-messaging, musical phone all were out of service.

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 last-ditch effort to revive him, they put a newspaper in front of him, but the young man didn't know how to use it. So, in the final panel someone announced the somber news, "We lost him."

These examples about self-storage and electronic gadgets can be commentaries on our lives. They show that it's easy for our possessions to get in the way of our faithfulness. When we think only of ourselves we put God on the back burner and increase the risk of idolatry of worldly things. And like the farmer in today's Gospel we find that the pleasure is fleeting.

IV.

I began this sermon by asking us to imagine the disease of affluenza. And I said that we were at-risk when our immune systems were weak. Obviously I'm using some symbolism here. Even so, how do we inoculate ourselves against this sickness? Where can we get a shot or take a pill?

Where indeed? You know what I'm going to say. The answer is that we inoculate ourselves in Jesus Christ. Come to church and the Holy Spirit will write you a prescription with all the refills you need.

Jesus Christ is the prescription to prevent affluenza. And 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 spend or buy can affect that reality. Our call is to live our lives so that we will be ready.

One of the ways to do that is to know that the problem with money is not holding on to it, but rather holding on 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. But when we open our hands to others, we are serving as God wants us to do.

And I believe we all can acknowledge that we are wealthy for purposes of this reading. The enemy tries to deceive us. He tries to make us compare ourselves with people who have more, not those who have less. He wants to stimulate our selfishness, not our generosity. But if we think about it I pray we will know that we enjoy the abundance of God's blessings.

So, let's see where this leaves us. 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 whether we were successful, but whether we were faithful. *Amen.*