SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON RICHARD C. WEYLS, COMMUNITY LIFE & SENIOR ASSOCIATE RECTOR
THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 3, 2025
ECCLESIASTES 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; PSALM 49:1-11; COLOSSIANS 3:1-11; LUKE 12:13-21

RICH FOR GOD

LUKE 12:13-21 *[Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: 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.' But 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."]*

One of the most challenging situations I have experienced as a priest is planning a funeral for a deceased person when the surviving family is in disarray and conflict. This creates additional suffering in an already painful situation. A long time ago and in a parish far far away I even had fighting family members request two separate funerals for the same person, so they didn't have to be in church at the same time. Fortunately, we were able to find a compromise that allowed all the grieving people to honor the deceased, embrace their grief, and say goodbye while avoiding additional interpersonal conflict. What was the issue that caused this family rupture? Money, property, and inheritance. I hope that none of you has ever been in a similar situation, but I suspect some of you have.

So, I noticed today when a man approaches Jesus and asks him to arbitrate a dispute he's having with his brother: "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." This is all the context we get, but the request sounds reasonable, doesn't it? After all, the guy isn't asking to inherit *more* than his brother; he just wants Jesus to advocate for basic fairness.

But Jesus responds almost harshly: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Wait — since when is desiring fairness the same thing as being greedy?

If that's not confusing enough, Jesus keeps going, telling his listeners a parable about a rich landowner who carefully stores his wealth ahead of his retirement — only to learn that his life is about to end: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Okay, I'm really confused now! What's wrong with planning ahead or planning for retirement? With saving for a rainy day? With making prudent choices when it comes to our wealth management?

But hang on, there's still more: Jesus concludes his parable with one more warning: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." What does *that* mean? What does it mean to be "rich toward God?"

These are all hard and uncomfortable questions, and maybe the best we can do is wrestle with them. Jesus' logic and values seem to be different from ours and he suggests that there is an important spiritual dimension in the way we approach and use money. It's my opinion that we spend money on what is important to us, on what we truly value. To me, in a free market, consumeristic economic system like ours, how we use money is primarily a spiritual issue.

Back to our Gospel. Jesus looks at the man embroiled in a family feud over money and sees that his obsessive need for a fair share is twisting, gnarling, and embittering his heart. In the heat of his pursuit, he's not able to discern that his inner life is in trouble. He can't see his own brother as anything more than an obstacle or a competitor. He's so concerned about possible scarcity that he doesn't even notice actual abundance (Jesus) standing right next to him. He's so narrowly focused on his economic affairs that he has no bandwidth for the salvation Jesus offers.

Meanwhile, Jesus looks at the rich landowner reveling in his stores of grain and sees a person drowning in self-absorption. A man enamored of his own power. A man oblivious to his own mortality. Notice the narcissism of his inner dialogue: "*I* will do this: *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, and be merry." In the carefully curated narrative of a proud, self-made man, Jesus sees an isolated, insecure soul who has forgotten human connection, forgotten God's generosity and provision, forgotten that possession is not stewardship, and forgotten that in the face of death we are all naked paupers but for the grace of God.

But surely Jesus isn't really talking about money; he's talking about our attachment to and attitude toward money. I don't know about that. Jesus talks about money and possessions more than just about any other topic. Why? Because there's something about it that distorts us. Something that makes us defensive. Something that makes it very hard for us to hear the Gospel in its risky, scandalous, impolite, imprudent, and radical fullness. There's something in money's allure that grabs hold of us and doesn't easily let go.

Jesus concludes his lesson with an exhortation to be "rich toward God." It's a beautiful and inspiring phrase, but what does it mean? What does a heart (and a lifestyle, and a home, and a bank account) "rich toward God" look like? Maybe — if we can infer from the lectionary reading — it means guarding against greed instead of obsessing over fairness. Maybe it means holding our mortality closer than we want to. Maybe it means asking hard questions about what makes us feel secure or insecure. Maybe it means acknowledging that even our hard-earned, well-earned, self-earned wealth comes from God and belongs to God. Maybe it means prioritizing human interconnectedness over personal gain or asset management. Maybe it means dialoguing with God more ardently than we monologue with ourselves. Maybe it means holding human wisdom lightly, knowing that God's wisdom will almost always render our own foolish.

In the parable Jesus tells, God confronts the rich landowner with the most chilling words: "This very night your life is being demanded of you." Are we listening? What would change about our financial lives if we really believed this? What would we do differently if we believed that God does in fact demand our lives from us every single day, in every single way? Because God does that, right? The call to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem is a daily, hourly, minute by minute call. Is it also a dollar-by-dollar call? If our lives *have* in fact been demanded of us, then how should we live? What should we leave behind? What should we carry forward? What should we give away?

Be rich toward God. Don't shy away. Be brave and wrestle with what this invitation means, because the richness we spend on God is the only richness we'll keep in the end.

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