

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – August 3, 2025
Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21
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Ecclesiastes, a book of the Hebrew Bible that is categorized as wisdom literature, begins with the words of the author, the Teacher: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" Another translation reads, "Utter futility! All is futile!" We might read this morning's lesson from Ecclesiastes and draw from it a cynical attitude about human endeavor. But we mustn't take that lesson from the book of Ecclesiastes. A broader understanding of this writing emphasizes that it is actions performed by humans for themselves alone that are futile in contrast to labor for God and for activities which are aligned with God's will that we love our neighbors.

Let's look now at our passage from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus had been teaching large crowds of people and healing the sick. The kingdom of God, of love was near. In the midst of this a man whose own concerns were most important to him secures Jesus' attention. "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." He wants to use Jesus to get what he regards as his fair share of wealth. Jesus will not be manipulated in this way. Instead, he challenges the man to look at his own greed, and he tells a parable to make his point.

The teaching of Jesus about wealth is in line with the message of Hebrew prophets before him – Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah. All these spokespersons for God insisted that God's vision for humanity includes a fair distribution of the material blessings of life. The will of God is that those who have more than they need must share with those who lack what they need. Love of neighbor means helping to relieve our neighbor's suffering. This is true religion.

In the parable a rich man's land produces a rich harvest. What will he do with his abundant crops? He decides to build bigger barns so that he can hoard his grain and his goods. He is pleased with this strategy and speaks to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi teaching mostly Jewish people. We may assume that the rich man in the parable is a Jew. That means that he would be familiar with biblical teaching regarding wealth. He would know that abundance is meant to be shared with the poor and needy. So, the rich man in Jesus' parable knew better than to hoard his wealth. He knew that an alternative to building bigger barns to hold his crops was to share them with the hungry. He knew what choice God called him to make and he deliberately turned away from God's way. So, God speaks, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus comments, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Faith can be defined as trust in God and for Christians, in Jesus Christ. Idolatry is trusting what is not God, putting something other than God in God's place. So, in his letter to the Colossians St. Paul says that greed is idolatry. In other words, greed – a selfish desire to acquire or possess more than one needs – amounts to putting possessions and wealth in God's rightful place. Idolatry is absolutely prohibited in the first two of the Ten Commandments. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself any idol." Of course, we do not worship statues and think they are gods. But what about money? On our paper money are the words "In God We Trust." Do we?

Part of trusting in someone is believing in his or her word, relying on the truth of what he or she says. I think this morning's lessons challenge us to look at ourselves and ask ourselves if we really trust Jesus' teaching about wealth. Is what he says true? Do we have faith in the prophetic vision of a world where there is enough for everyone? Would we rather be "rich toward God" than store up treasures for ourselves? If so, what will we do and what will we give to make God's vision for humanity a reality today?

God loves us and wants what is best for us. Jesus guides us to make good choices, not foolish choices – for our good and the good of all God's creatures. There must be something very good about not being greedy. For us in the culture we live in, that might be peace, the opposite of a constant and restless desire for more. It might be the joy of sharing and knowing how you have helped a neighbor, near or far. It might be a relaxation of our fears that we won't have what we want or need, as we become more attuned to the greater needs of others. It might be a growing gratitude to God for the blessings we enjoy and a deepening of our trust in God. It might be saving the precious time and energy we waste on acquiring and maintaining possessions. The blessings go on and on when we live according to God's vision for humanity.

As I've mentioned many times, Jesus often reminds his disciples that walking in his way is about more than knowing what to do, it's about action. After washing his disciples' feet on the night before he died, Jesus pointed out that he was giving them an example to follow. He said, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

As people who love God how will we take the lessons we learn from scripture and apply them to our daily lives? As a parish, how will we be guided by this teaching? In our secular culture and even in the culture of the institutional church it is very easy to forget the life-giving teaching of God. That's one reason that the Gospel message must be preached in churches. It's a reason to keep church doors open. It's a reason for Christian people to come to church. To remember the way of salvation, God's way, and to receive the strength to live by God's teaching.

Jesus told his followers a story about a rich man. He had so much produce that he thought to himself, "I'm all set. I'll never be hungry again." And he was right, because that night he dropped dead. And I wonder, did he then meet his Lord? And did God say to him, "Weren't you listening to my Word? Was there something you didn't understand?" May we listen to God and do our part. In Jesus' name. Amen.