**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 13**

[Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23](https://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp13_RCL.html#ot2)[Psalm 49:1-11](https://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp13_RCL.html#ps2)[Colossians 3:1-11](https://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp13_RCL.html#nt1)[Luke 12:13-21](https://lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp13_RCL.html#gsp1)

**Rich Man, Poor Man**

It has now been reported that the latest winning national lottery ticket was sold on Friday in the Chicago area.  The winner will receive $1.34 Billion, less taxes.  That means that the lucky winner will, by the time all appropriate agencies have taken their piece of the pie, he or she will be left with only a mere $386 million dollars.  Which, taken in perspective of $1.4 billion is mere chicken feed.  But no use grumbling about it.  You take what you can get in this world and, as they say, that’s life.

It did get me wondering what I’d do with $386 million dollars, as I also pondered the news that I need four new tires on the car.  I knew at once, I’d pay off all mortgages and student loans, car loans, and dispensing with the need for new tires, I would buy new cars for me and for the rest in the family.  And Rachel will be happy to know that I would send a couple of million over to the church and she could fix anything she wanted on campus, hire full time gardeners, buy Nadaka and put some low-income housing nearby.  All the dreams and visions that continue to dance before all our hearts, would become reality. And let’s be honest, you’ve got your list, too, from taking care of the kids, giving money to charities, from saving the children, to saving animals and trees, to setting up your own charity to save the world in one way or another.

And then what.

I would venture to say, that having erased certain financial worries, most of us here would wonder what God would want us to do with the couple of hundred million dollars left.

Do we keep it, storing it up with all our added stuff along with more mansions in which to store it all?  Do we spend it on added security, alarmed fences, a herd of German Shepherds?

Whether rich or poor, the question is inevitable.  What do we do with wealth far beyond our needs?

Many of us here today have managed to stay afloat, keeping a roof over our heads, sometimes grand, sometimes humble, but whatever our circumstances or however we got there, most of us have held, and do hold within, a certain anxiety about money.  We may not be faced with eviction, as some are. We may not be threatened with the cutting off of utilities as some are.  In fact, most of us are not in any particular danger of any of these kinds of circumstances.  And yet, deep down we ponder about the what ifs.  What if I, or one of my loved ones, becomes seriously ill and the insurance will only go so far?  What if the car gives out at the same time taxes are due?  Why does it take so long for the bills to shrink?   Nothing leads me to think I will be on the street, but then, there but for the grace of God, go I.

If only, we think, I could win the lottery. Then all my troubles would be over, and my anxiety would vanish.

Jesus is pretty clear about the subject of wealth, although he is less concerned with wealth itself, and more concerned about its dangers.  Frankly Jesus doesn’t care how much money or things someone possesses, it’s what that money and things might do to us and to our perspective that he is concerned about.

Jesus is talking amid a crowd of people and, unbelievably, someone asks him to intercede on a personal behalf concerning the family inheritance, and his brother’s need to divide it fairly.  Jesus doesn’t dodge the question but uses it as an opportunity to offer a parable about a rich man, who has far more money and things than he needs or knows what to do with other than to stockpile the lot.

The way Jesus tells the story, we hear the rich man’s inner thoughts to himself. He seems to have no-one else to confer with except himself, and probably is used to a kind of isolation brought about by his self-absorption with money and whatever earthly satisfaction it brings to him.  Thus, he feels he is wise enough to know what he is to do.  He sees no need to confer with anyone about it, or even pray to God about it.  He simply decides to build bigger storage units in order to pack away all his stuff, while effectively holding on to it.

Storage costs for you and me, by the way, run about $250 or so for a 10X14 space. For the rich man, who needs more barns, probably thousands.

But then, prayer or no prayer, God said to the man, “You fool.” And wrapped up in those two words is the rest of the conversation from God’s perspective.  It’s over, and you can’t take any of it with you.

You can’t take the love of community with you, because you have chosen to isolate yourself and your wealth, taking more pleasure in the accumulation of that wealth than pleasure in taking time with others and for others.

You cannot blame the wealth for your isolation and estrangement from others or from God.  You carved all that out yourself to your own demise.  You have distanced yourself from those who, unlike you, are not as rich, and you have no understanding of who they are, how they live or how life treats them, or what it is they need in order to thrive and survive all the challenges they face.

You have lost all sense of perspective and in a way, God is saying to the man, you are already dead, even if you are still breathing.

The fact is that we don’t have to be as rich as the one percent, to be somewhat ignorant of how many people living around us are at or below the poverty time.  The complexities of the world’s problems can be overwhelming and seemingly beyond anyone’s capacity to solve. Thus, we do quite often resort to a sort of head-in-the-sand naivete, which, in God’s perspective, places us on a slippery slope sending us sliding into spiritually dangerous waters.

Perhaps if the rich man had put as much emphasis on relationships, and on the problems facing many of his neighbors, he may have stored up the kind of treasures that were less for the benefit of himself, and far more rich toward God.

We tell ourselves with much relief that none of this applies to us. We’re not rich like the rich man and may enjoy good, wholesome relationships.  Yet, our earthly sophistication leads us to think… let’s be frank, we are glad of our good relationships, but they don’t keep the creditors at bay.  And there we are again….our anxieties becoming the driving forces in our lives, pushing us ever so gently down the slippery slope.

Under all Jesus words is a message about anxiety.  Jesus tells us not to worry about what we are to eat or wear.  He is issuing a warning to each of us to guard against greed caused by anxiety.  When we become too anxious about what tomorrow will bring, we start taking stock of our money and our stuff.  We begin to feel a need to build on whatever security we already have, do build more and more resources, in order that we can worry less.  All the while, our focus on building for ourselves precludes building community and relationships. If all we can think about is money, we begin to forget that money is not our identity.  We begin to think that the richer we are, the more important we become, and we assume an identity which may not have any resemblance to who we really are.  And we begin to understand Jesus’ point… is it worth it?

If we forget that money is not who we are, then we find we have no identity except through money and possessions.  We become exhausted with the weight of it and with the fear of losing it and at the end of the day, no matter how much we have we become lost in the work of accumulation, all the while feeling more and more worthless.

In a former life, I was a staffing professional working with entry level clerks to long-time CEO’s and COO’s, and the like.  Many entry level clerks wanted any job that paid more per hour.  The job was irrelevant, the dollar was important.  It didn’t matter if they enjoyed the job or not, they just wanted more money. In a way, you might think this makes sense at a young age, when one is getting started.  But our decisions about which road we should take can lead us far afield from who we are and what we want to do and be in this life.

I can well recall top executives confessing that they had chased the money only to end up in work that was, for them, unsatisfying, unfulfilling, leaving their souls with a sense of emptiness and futility.  Now it was too late.  With a high-end mortgage, three children in ivy league schools, and a world of expectations built around continued success, they were stuck.  They had accumulated a wealth of money, possessions, accomplishments and status-filled positions and recognition, but had accumulated little or nothing rich to God. To give up the six-digit job and begin again in a new career better suited to the truth of who one is, would mean dropping to minimum wage, selling the house, telling the kids they had to pay for their own education, and probably going through a divorce.

God doesn’t ask for that kind of pain, nor does God encourage it, but if one has the courage to make a U turn and takes it on, as some do, one finds that, as a result of giving up all that was, one’s soul becomes rich, indeed, toward God. Such decisions come from prayer, praying to God for the strength to address and make shifts in our lives that are pleasing to God.

When we do pray to God, we do not complain, as we heard Martha complaining to Jesus about how unfair it was for Mary to leave all the work to Martha.  Martha wanted Jesus to align himself with her in a fairness dispute, just as did the man in today’s scripture account, asking Jesus to be judge and jury.

Jesus simply suggests that Martha is distracted by many things.  Our rich man is distracted by his wealth and belongings and keeping them safe.  Both are distracted by one focus, one fixation, and that is additional resources of one kind or another that can add to their self-satisfaction.

If only my brother would give me a fair share of our inheritance.

If only Mary would do her share of the work.

If only my storage were bigger.

Jesus refuses to be judge and jury for any of our requests to have him sort us out. That duty, he says, belongs to God.  It is for God to judge and therefore it is to God we ask guidance.

And now, Jesus says, we are not to worry.  Not to worry?  By earthly perspectives, we have to say to Jesus, you’re kidding!  And yet, Jesus isn’t expecting us to give up all we have, whether it is enough to get us through to next payday, or whether we have enough to live comfortably and then some for the rest of our days.  We are, none of us, expected to turn into mini-Frances of Assisi, owning one sack robe and a pair of rope sandals.

We are, however, called to pull back with full awareness of why, from our human need to acquire, to crave or to grapple for, at any cost.

We are called to lift away our focus on what can be acquired as earthly prizes, to what can be acquired through faith in God and God’s gracious gifts of grace. “Do not be afraid, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

As if to awake us from our very human complacency about our deeply imbedded frames of reference around money and the accumulation of possessions and stuff, for accumulation’s sake, Jesus uses this parable as riveting wakeup call to each of us.  It is something like a last resort warning.  Hear what is important to God. Hear what is meaningless to anyone else but you in life.  It will have little meaning after death other than filling someone’s coffers, and you will not be present to make decisions you wish they would make or to offer advice on how best they use their inheritance.

Jesus uses parables to warn us against making stupid decisions, making tragically mis-directed choices, all devolving from a misuse of earthly resources such as possessions and money.  The parables are invariably about distraction from God’s continual desires to capture our attention.  God wants us to discern a better way and our capacity to trust in God can only become more richly rewarded, as our distractions by earthly temptations for money, power and status decrease.  This is the legacy God wants us to leave to those who come behind.

The lessons learned come from the choices we make throughout our lives, not just at the outset of adulthood, but even as we age and our wisdom born of past mistakes, allows us to ponder new directions.

The parable of the rich man can be summed up to a core message from Jesus.  Don’t allow your pleasure in your balance sheet to bankrupt your soul. Don’t wait until the time of foreclosure to realize where your focus ought to be.  When the time comes for you to leave this earth, you leave the balance sheet behind, and as impressive as it has been on earth, it is utterly meaningless in heaven.

Alas, there is no happy ending for the rich man in this parable.  No time for course correction.  The rich man has no time for penitence or absolution, and will most likely find himself in like circumstances as did another rich man calling out to Lazarus for water.

If your soul is found wanting, bereft of any prosperity of spirit or richness of possibility, this means nothing on earth, but in heaven, it is a cause of great sadness and disappointment.

The issue has less to do with how much money and possessions you have and has more to do with our distractions from living in the way of God.

God knows, I can’t help wondering what I will do with the hundred million dollars I have left. I think about it.  Joe could have his new organ and we could build a special apse to house it.  Everyone would have their own pew with velvet cushions and built in speakers.  John would have a technical team working day and night.

But at the end of the day, I think I could do with a lot less.  Paying off student loans would be very nice, but really, all I need is to enough to buy four new tires or, to paraphrase what was heard to be said in response to the news of the $billion win, I just want a hundred dollars, so that I could buy all my friends a cup of coffee!”

Rich man. Poor man. No matter which.  After all the discussion, our souls call for the question:  What does it mean to be rich? To be rich in spirit or, most of all, to be “rich toward God?”

God or a whole pile of manna.  That is the question.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

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