

**Being Rich Toward God**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost - August 1, 2010**  
**Luke 12:13-21**

The family marched into my office one morning. Well, part of the family. Their 100-year-old father had died, and although most of his estate was clearly and fairly divided amongst his children, there was a dispute over a sizeable bank account that hadn't been specified in the will. One of the daughters - the one who was not present - had had power of attorney and had taken care of the old man's financial affairs for several years. Her name as well as Dad's was on this particular account. She insisted that it was by rights hers alone, in light of all the work she'd done on Dad's behalf. The other siblings begged to differ.

"Pastor, tell our sister to divide the family inheritance with us." I don't know if *Jesus* heard a similar demand with a sinking heart, but *I* sure did! I offered to be present if they would they all sit down together to hash it out, but that was a non-starter. Part of the problem was trying to figure out which sibling was still speaking to all the rest, so that he could actually suggest a meeting with the sister. After two solid hours, in which I kept saying some variation of Jesus' words: "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you," I was ready to add a phrase of my own: *Oy vey*. They finally stalked out of the of-

fice, telling me that clearly this was a waste of time. After they'd left, the music director said, "I guess I'm glad I didn't ask them to help move in the new set of kettledrums that their sister just bought for the church's music program!"

You don't need Jesus to tell you that few things raise temperatures and divide families like inheritance issues. Any Ann Landers column will do. And millions of dollars needn't be at stake. One family I knew fought bitterly over an old tattered carpet and a couple hundred bucks. Inheritance battles drag up old slights, old resentments, and old fears that "Dad always liked you best." Estate debates call into question current relationships between siblings; the care each provided during a parent's lifetime; the present financial status and "deserving" of each sibling, and more. What a rat's nest!

The sad thing about the situation I just mentioned is how little everyone stood to gain. Legal expenses would shrink each sibling's share to a couple thousand dollars; they had received many thousands more from the main estate already. On top of that, the dispute had set the whole family at odds with each other; regardless of how money got distributed, that would not heal the harm that had been done.

"Take care!" Jesus said. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Now the parable of the rich fool that he then told is wonderful in its own right; but what caught my attention was that remarkable phrase: "Be on your guard against *all kinds of greed*." All kinds? Is greed like ice cream, coming in 31 varieties?

Mostly we think greed has to do with money. But we can be greedy about any material possessions. Little children demand whatever toy their brother, sister, or best friend is playing with. Teenagers try to convince parents that their ability to function as a minimally cool person depends on having the latest iPhone apps, trendy clothes, or PlayStation. Adults amass upscale appliances, collect gourmet foods and wine, and fantasize about the humungous house with the gorgeous view. We may want *more*; we may prefer *better*; but whenever we "want what we want when we want it," we're well on the way to greediness.

And greed *needn't* involve material things. We all know people who are greedy for attention or affection and who will go to great and sometimes self-destructive lengths to get it. There are thrill-seekers, greedy for new experiences - and they'll risk death to gratify that desire. Some people are greedy for power, prestige, or popularity; they'll turn themselves inside out, betray friendships, even break the law to obtain what *they* desire. There are some pitiful souls who thrive on being miserable; they are, in a sense, greedy for opportunities to feel sorry for themselves. Greed, alas, is a many-splendored thing.

Sometimes we can even be spiritually greedy. The man in today's Gospel just *assumed* he could interrupt and make demands of Jesus, who would then promptly comply. How often, when we pray, do *we* expect, or even demand, that God drop everything and fulfill our expectation? How often are we angry or disappointed when a worship service doesn't move us? If we've experienced a time of close, sweet communion with our Savior, then when we hit a spiritual dry spell, are we tempted to complain, pout, or wonder if he doesn't love us any more?

The problem with every kind of greed is that "it's all about me." Listen to the rich fool in Jesus' parable. Every other word is "me, myself, and I." He refuses to consult with anyone else about how best to handle the unexpectedly bountiful harvest. He talks only to himself. He considers only himself. He doesn't give his hired hands a bonus; he doesn't share, as God commanded, with the poor in his community. He doesn't offer a tithe to God in thanksgiving.

Martin Luther defined sin as "the soul being curved in upon itself." Whenever we put our own desires, plans and fears at the center of our hearts, that's what happens. In a way, that means we're greedy. We want what we want, when we want it. And we want it regardless of the effect that has on ourselves, our friends and families, our church and community, and our relationship with God.

*Beware of every kind of greed, Jesus warns us. For everything that we try to gather and hoard in our hearts will, sooner or later, be required of us. It is temporary; a "loaner," you might say. Nothing - not money, prestige, power, possessions, satisfaction, misery, thrills, not even family, friends, or spiritual highs - nothing except God may be enthroned in our hearts. Being "rich toward God" means allowing God to fill us with himself; with his love, life, power, and holiness. And it means constantly saying, "Not my will but yours be done; into your hands I commend my body and soul and all that is mine."*

Often when we seem to be most deprived of the things we're greedy for, God uses that time to stretch our hearts: not into "bigger and better barns," but into more lovely, holy temples in which his Holy Spirit might dwell. He reams out deep places in our souls so that we might yearn to be more and more filled with our Savior as he comes to us in Word and Sacrament. He even allows the good gifts of this world to be withdrawn from us from time to time, so that we learn compassion, pity, and generosity towards others.

Many of you know the prayer that was found in the possession of a Civil War soldier who died on the battlefield. I can't quote it exactly, but in it, the soldier says he asked for wealth, friendship, strength, and many other good gifts. Instead, God gave him what on the surface seemed the opposite of what he desired. In the end, he concludes, "I

asked God for all things, that I might enjoy life. He gave me life, that I might enjoy all things. I received nothing of what I asked for, but all that I ever needed." He was beginning to understand what Jesus meant about being rich towards God.

For many people, the hardest thing *in* the world is to trust that, contrary to the wisdom *of* the world, life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions, responsibilities, privileges, or even relationships. Even poor Martha had trouble with that, as she tried to impress Jesus with her many chores on his behalf. Only one thing is needful, and it has been freely given to any who are wise enough to receive it. That's the Bread of Life, given in preached word, poured water, broken bread and shared wine. That will fill us to overflowing, no matter how much we receive ourselves or share with others. And it will abide in this life, and in the world to come. God grant us the wisdom, grace, and faith to receive him eagerly, humbly, and gratefully. Amen.