

Yr. C, Proper 13
August 4, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1565 Words

Lessons: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23
Psalm 49:1-11
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

People in the crowd are always shouting their orders and instructions at Jesus, as if he is their short order cook. “Hey Jesus!” said a stranger in today’s Gospel story. “Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” People also shout out their questions and personal concerns. A little while ago—two chapters ago—a lawyer shouted, “Hey Jesus! What do *I have to do* to inherit eternal life?”

It can be pretty sobering to read the Gospels carefully, because we discover how often Jesus gives *unsatisfying* answers to peoples’ questions and concerns. Jesus is not afraid of offending people who think they deserve something...like a family inheritance or eternal life.

Is it *wrong* to want to know what we have to do to inherit eternal life? Is it wrong to want the inheritance your parents left you and your siblings? I don’t *think* so. Those things seem pretty reasonable. Yet, in both of these cases, Jesus takes the legitimate concerns of people in the crowd and turns them into demanding, even *offensive*, stories—the parable of the Good Samaritan in the first case and the parable of the Greedy Farmer in this case.

Just imagine making an appointment with the priest to register your concern about a brother or sister—either literal or a sister or brother-in-Christ. As soon as you have described your complaint, imagine this response: “I’m not going to get involved in that.” There are no comforting words, like: “Gosh, I’m sorry.” Or “Oh, that sounds awful.” Or “Maybe I could talk to them for you.”

Instead, the priest—following the example of Jesus—says, “I’m really more concerned about your possessiveness...your selfishness. I think you really should be focused on that.” How many of us would sit there and listen to a hypothetical story about greed and death? I would not. I might even say to a clergy person—the representative of Jesus Christ—“Hey, I didn’t come here for a lecture. I came here for some help.”

Nevertheless, Jesus begins telling *this* story: “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?’”

This is where I want to jump in and say, “Wait a minute! Is it his fault the land produced abundantly? I mean, the Bible speaks over and over about abundance being the will of God for the faithful children of God. Would it be better for those crops to just rot in the field for lack of storage?”

Jesus ignores our rebuttal and puts more words into the hypothetical farmer’s mouth, who says, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones...(to) store all my grain and my goods.”

Once again, I feel like defending the farmer. I want to say, “Here’s a guy who has just come up with a practical solution for a practical problem. It’s a *good problem* to have, isn’t it?”

And I will confess that this story is hitting very close to home for us at St. Peter’s. We have an utterly inadequate nursery space, Christian education space, office space, and fellowship and funeral reception space. We are filling up our columbarium niches and need more of those. Important things like our organ and our roof and our parking lot are really showing their age.

And so, I want to say, “Jesus, our vestry and our Feasibility Study Committee are just trying to come up with practical solutions for our practical problems. We are a growing congregation. That’s a *good problem* to have, isn’t it?”

Jesus is relentless. He puts still more words into the hypothetical farmer's mouth, who says, "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; *relax*, eat, drink, be merry.'"

These are very challenging words to anyone who is retired...or coasting...or 'set for life' with an inheritance or other financial windfall. Frankly, these words are just as challenging to those of us who are working and saving for retirement, hoping the stock market will rise up for us when it is our turn and that social security will remain at least partially intact.

The bad news is that there is very little wiggle room for most of us in this passage. We *want* to have ample goods laid up for our future. And I think that is good stewardship. We *do want* to relax a little bit, eat, drink, and be happy in our lives. And I think God *does want us* to rest, and have enough to eat and drink, and to be happy in our lives.

And *that* is precisely why...Jesus says...that God says, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And (all those) things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

You see, God wants *all of God's children* to have a future, of course! God wants *all of God's children* to eat and drink and experience some happiness. And while that definitely *includes us*, God's will *also includes* those who effectively have no future because even our great, wealthy nation lacks a basic requirement for a living wage to be paid to workers.

God's will includes all those who *don't have enough* to eat or drink, including children who bear no responsibility for their plight. God's will includes all those who suffer as a result of other peoples' greed, violence, injustice, oppression, and environmental degradation.

Dear children of God, this is what is missing from the story Jesus told to the man who wanted *his* inheritance. In the parable, there is not one word—not even one thought—by the farmer about *anyone else*.

As practical as that farmer was for *managing* the abundance of his crop, there was not one word—not even a thought—about *sharing* the abundance of his crop with his neighbors.

As legitimate as it was for him to build bigger barns, his lack of imagination about how to share that power and resource with his community was absolutely *illegitimate* in God's eyes. As defensible as it was for him to want to relax a little, and have enough to eat and drink and be happy, it was *indefensible* that he failed to give a thought about how those values might be nice for other people, also.

That is what is missing from the story Jesus told. That is the bad news in today's Gospel.

The good news is that this does not have to be missing from *our stories*. We can build a bigger house or retirement account *and also* be generous toward those in need, which is the same thing as being generous toward God.

Our congregation can build a bigger building *and also* keep sharing that abundance with those who don't belong to this community. Generously sharing space with those in need is the same as generously sharing space with God.

Our nation can build wealth for those who are already wealthy *and also* share that wealth with those who are trapped in poverty from generation to generation. Generously sharing our abundance with some consideration for the common good is what makes our nation a shining city on a hill and not a private club for the lucky few.

We should not be surprised that the one who fed the 5000 and the 4000 would so constantly have ‘sharing’ on his mind. We should not be surprised that the one who healed the sick and welcomed the outcasts would so constantly have ‘other peoples’ needs’ on his mind. And so we should not be surprised that he challenges his followers—*us*—to be more like him.

And Jesus also warns us—*rightly so*—that our chance to live this generous story will not last forever, because *we* will not last forever. The day we are invited to follow and imitate Jesus is *this day*. The day we are invited to be generous like Jesus is *this day*. The day we are invited to enlarge our imaginations and our stories so that we can *do more* than what is selfish—and *be more* than someone or some church or some nation which is selfish—*that day* is today...because it is the only day that we know we’ve got.

If this Gospel story sounds offensive, it is because we are thinking like the greedy farmer...we are thinking only of ourselves. If this Gospel story sounds like a threat, it’s because we are thinking like the greedy farmer...we are thinking only of the length of *our* lives.

On the other hand, if this story sounds like an *invitation*, then you are already on your way to following and imitating Jesus. If the story sounds like an invitation, then you’re already on your way to being generous like Jesus. If this story sounds like an invitation, you are already on your way to enlarging your imagination and your story to be more than it currently is.

So, may God bless us...and the Church...and our nation with abundance. And, for all our sakes, may God bless *more* than just the building up of our barns and buildings and retirement accounts. May God also bless the building up of our souls to become even more rich toward God, which *in this mortal life* means becoming less selfish...and more rich toward all of God’s children, especially those in need.

Amen.