

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today's lessons seem to hammer home the reminder that no matter how many years pass, no matter how much culture advances civilization, no matter how different the context in scripture and history, there are some elements of our humanity that just don't change. Regardless of the time or place, God's people have always had a tendency to be more concerned with the present than with the future, despite the promises of God's provision for them, including the promise of life everlasting made by our Lord Christ, the incarnate God. The conversation Jesus has with the man in the crowd in today's Gospel reminds us that even two thousand years ago the perspective and balance between life in the here and now and life in the world to come has been difficult to keep.

This unnamed man is obviously not the firstborn in his family. He may not even be the second born. If he were, he would not be worried about how his brother will divide his inheritance. You'll remember that according to Judaic practices, the oldest brother would receive two-thirds of an estate and the younger would receive one-third. It was common in those days to take disagreements and disputes about matters of law to the teachers, the Rabbis. The question this man asked of Jesus was not inappropriate. But we can bet the answer was not what he expected. Jesus doesn't in any way condemn the man; but he does warn him and those in the crowd with him to be on guard against greed because the blessings of life do not come from money or from things.

I can't help but think of the documentary "I Am," which a good number of us saw a few weeks ago at the first of our Summer Series. It's the story of Tom Shadyac, a talented comedian, director, and producer who made a boat-load of money through successful films like "Ace Ventura, Pet Detective," "The Nutty Professor," "Liar, Liar," and "Bruce Almighty." As he became more and more successful, he started buying things, like airplanes and a number of obscenely large homes in beautiful places. In 2007, when he was 49 years old, he was seriously injured in a bicycle accident, and in the extended time it took to heal from post-concussion syndrome, he evaluated his life and his lifestyle, sold his significant real estate holdings and most of his possessions, donated large amounts of money, and eventually left the film-making industry. He now teaches film at the University of Memphis, a surprising landing place for a man like him, I think.

When asked if he would have changed his life if the concussion never happened, Shadyac replied: "I was already reevaluating the dissonance between making all this money and being on the set with people, the crew, many of whom couldn't afford the basic needs of their families. It didn't seem fair to me. So I don't think the concussion did it although it was definitely a crisis and crisis will often trigger things like this. I didn't give up everything to be happy. In fact, I'm not even sure what happiness is. Happiness comes from the word "happenstance" which relates to things going on outside of you. What was happening to me was definitely on the inside. But after I gave up everything I felt a lot more joy in my life. A lot more contentment. There's nothing wrong, though, with making a lot of money ... this is not a judgment on anyone at all. I was just taking in a lot more than I needed and this wasn't good for me."

This is, of course, one man's story about finding meaning in his life. I have no idea what his religious beliefs and practices are, but I do believe his story is a solid example of what Jesus is telling us in this Parable of the Rich Fool. In Luke's Gospel, we often see a negative portrayal of wealth, possessions, economic status, and power. But I don't believe Jesus is saying here that money and material things—treasures, as Luke calls them—are bad, unless they become the catalysts for our lives, our reason for being, or that we become selfish and greedy because of them. The same applies to other areas of our lives: work, play—whatever besides God receives priority and passion in our lives. Jesus says, "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.” In this parable, Jesus calls us to examine our lives, to evaluate our priorities, to discern what our own situation would be if this very night our life on earth ended. As Paul writes to the Colossians, being Christians requires us to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” To his words I would add an “unless:” unless we set our minds to share those things we have on earth with those who do not.

Paul brings into his instruction more than just money. You must get rid of whatever in you is earthly: “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” Don’t lie to one another. In verses we don’t hear today, he continues, “As God’s chosen ones...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you...and above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony...teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.”

What Paul gives us here is not just a list and litany of how to behave as Christians, but specific ways we may become rich toward God, which is the purpose of Jesus’ telling the Parable of the Rich Fool. So often when we hear our Lord’s teachings we automatically think that what he’s calling us to do is so hard we’ll never be able to do it. But that’s just not true. Think for a moment about your interactions with others, whether it’s the clerk at the big-box store who gives you a hard time, or your precious child or grandchild, to whom you cannot imagine being anything more than kind and loving. And think about how much better you feel when you’re kind than you do when you’re impatient or rude. If our primary focus is on ourselves and what we want, we’ll probably have a hard time finding that peace of God that passes all understanding, or the joy and contentment that Tom Shadyac found once he put his desire for material wealth aside and replaced it with what made him happy.

There’s one other teaching from Paul’s letter to the Colossians that I believe we should ponder: “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom,” he says. We’re reluctant to “teach and admonish” because we’re fearful of the repercussions. But when we do so, with love and humility, we are opening for others the door to God’s grace, the opportunity for them to also become rich toward God, and to experience God’s loving kindness here on this earth. The Parable of the Rich Fool is not just about money. It’s about living life fully in God’s grace, pursuing the gifts that life brings us, not just life everlasting, but life in the here and now.

Paulo Coehlo tells the story of Abin-Alsar, who as a boy overheard a conversation between his father and a dervish.¹ ‘Careful with your work,’ said the dervish. ‘Think of what future generations will say about you.’ ‘So what?’ replied his father. ‘When I die, everything shall end, and it will not matter what they say.’

“Abin-Alsar never forgot that conversation. His whole life, he made an effort to do good, to help people and go about his work with enthusiasm. He became well known for his concern for others; when he died, he left behind a great number of things which improved the quality of life in his town.

“On his tombstone, he had the following epitaph engraved: ‘A life which ends with death is a life not well spent.’”

As the Psalmist writes, “Whoever is wise will ponder these things, and consider well the mercies of the Lord.”

Amen.

¹ Synthesis, Year C, Proper 13, Tradition, July 31, 2016.