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Pentecost VIII & Proper 13
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Text: Luke 12:13 – 21
Title:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. As I was studying this week's readings, which are called pericopes, I was struck once again by how God's Word speaks so directly to things in our world today. The texts of Holy Scripture were written so long ago, thousands of years ago in fact, but they are still very much applicable to us, here and now. And this is especially the case when it comes to how God wants you and me to view the many material gifts and blessings that He has given to our world in general and to each of us in particular.

Today's first reading alone, from the book of Ecclesiastes, speaks volumes to just how important all of our stuff is in the overall scheme of things. Even though we don't look at Ecclesiastes very often – it's a book that's easy to look past on the way to the Psalms or the prophetic writings – the eternal wisdom that it contains is very helpful to us today. A book that was written by one of the richest and wisest men to ever live, King Solomon, Ecclesiastes reminds us that every earthly thing that we make a priority of is ultimately, useless and worthless. "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind," King Solomon writes. His wisdom helped him to see the world and all of its things both good and bad for what they are, a passing wind.

Solomon knew what we seem to forget all too often in our world today, that to us as Christians, the world ultimately means nothing. Now that doesn't mean that we should just forget about everything that's going on in our world, and that we shouldn't have anything to do with it like a bunch of monks and nuns who withdraw from society to live their lives in a cloister.

No, God makes it clear that He wants us to be engaged with the world around us in order to spread His Gospel to all. To be sure, there are many things that shouldn't concern us too much, but there are other things that should concern us greatly, like the random violence and the persecution of Christians that is on the rise all around us. You can see examples of it in any number of places if you do a little digging, especially online. But in the midst of such news and concerns it seems like the primary focus of today's Gospel reading isn't all that big of a deal. What are Jesus' and Paul's warnings about coveting in the face of murder and persecution from the enemies of the Gospel?

In our present day, we have elevated the sin of coveting to an art form. Coveting in this society is simply a way of life, and it's so engrained in us that we don't even recognize it. Part of the problem is that we don't really understand what coveting is; even those of us who are Christians and should understand it as a part of God's Word don't really get it. It has become one of those church words that we use in the commandments, but we don't usually take the time to define what it means. In short, the word "covet" means to desire, to want, to long for or to crave something intensely. Coveting is an intensely strong desire to possess something that you want, not something that you need, and the ninth and tenth commandments forbid coveting your neighbor's possessions and his relationships.

But in spite of the fact that two different commandments deal with coveting – that's 2 out of only 10 commandments mind you, coveting is one of those sins that we don't really take too seriously. It's not like it's as bad as walking up to someone and shooting a gun in their face, and it just doesn't seem as serious as cheating on your spouse or stealing something from someone's house. We do a real good job of convincing ourselves that coveting is somehow a lesser sin, but we're way off the mark on that. In the fifth verse of today's epistle reading from Colossians,

coveting is placed on the same level as "...sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which *is* idolatry." These Paul calls earthly things that need to be put to death, and Jesus warns us all to "...be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." The sin of coveting is the same thing as worshipping a false god in place of the Triune God, and it's just as bad as evil desires and sexual immorality.

But Jesus doesn't stop His warning with simple covetousness. He tells the people a parable, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and He thought to Himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." The point of the parable is the proper use of the possessions that God gives us.

The man is called a fool for not knowing how to properly use his abundant possessions. He decides to hoard them and build larger places to store them all. The man is building up treasure here instead of getting rich in God. And the way to be rich toward God is to serve and love your neighbor using all of the gifts and talents that God has blessed you with. This is the principle of Biblical stewardship which is the idea of properly using all of the possessions and blessings that God has given to you. We tend to think of stewardship as only being about money, but it's so much more than that. Stewardship is living the Christian life. God deserves our offerings, of course, but He also deserves our efforts in times of service as well. As we give God a regular and proportionate gift of our income, He also expects a gift of our talents at the same time, and as we willingly give these things to the Lord, we store up riches toward God.

It's so easy to fail in stewardship though. There are far too many things that compete for our time and treasures, and these things make it difficult to properly manage these gifts that God has given to us. We all have bills to pay and things that we want to buy (there's that coveting again), and most of us would rather do any number of things rather than volunteer when needed at church or someplace else that has a need for our service. If that weren't true, then there'd be no problem finding help for any of the number of things that need to get done around a place like this, and you wouldn't see such a gap between the offerings that we've received and the offerings that we need. Our idolatrous coveting for more and more gets in the way of responsible stewardship and, ultimately our salvation, as we place our covetous desires ahead of others and in place of our relationship with God.

Thankfully, Paul gives us hope in the beginning and at the end of today's reading from Colossians. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory...but Christ is all, and in all." Earlier in this same epistle, Paul tells us that we are hidden with Christ because we died in the waters of Holy Baptism, and here he is reminding us of that point once again. But even more than being hidden in Him, we will appear with Him when He returns in His glory. In other words, when Christ returns from His place at the right hand of the Father, our souls will be reunited with our bodies which will return from the grave at the same time. That promise was made to each and every one of us when we were baptized, and it was sealed by the sign of the cross and the sacrifice that was made there for us. That's one of the reasons that making the sign of the cross was encouraged by Martin Luther, to remind you that you are a baptized child of

God who is joined to His death and especially to His resurrection on the last day. It is a promise from God, and it will be fulfilled just like all of His promises are.

Until that day arrives, the Lord has sent His Holy Spirit to you to give you strength and endurance, and to work in you each day to make you more and more holy. That's called sanctification, and as the Holy Spirit sanctifies you, He gives you the power to resist coveting and teaches you to be content with what you have. He also works to teach you how to be a proper steward of your possessions and to put others needs ahead of your own wants and desires.

The world around you constantly runs contrary to the Word of God. An entire industry called advertising exists today to encourage you to covet more and more possessions, and there are all kinds of temptations to challenge your growth in stewardship. But the Lord knows these things, and His work in your life will be enough to provide you with the ability to resist the temptations that can lure you away from His Word. And as you pray for growth in your faith, and as the Spirit answers that prayer, you will be able to look away from the things of this world and set your mind on things above to live a life that is rich in God and that is richly blessed by Him. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.