

August 4, 2019

*Story of a man who tried to disprove the cliché “You can’t take it with you.”*

The truth is, you can’t take it with you. I don’t care if your name is Bill Gates or Warren Buffet, when you die, your net worth will be the same...zero.

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

So, is greed the problem Jesus is addressing? Or is greed the symptom of a much more dangerous spiritual disease?

Consider the parable that Jesus tells. The rich man appears to have gained his wealth honestly. And his crops have done well. Is there anything wrong with being rich? Of course not, if you have gained your wealth honestly through making good decisions and working hard. Should he feel guilty about his luck in his crops doing well that year? I don’t see why he should...there’s nothing evil or sinful about being lucky. So what is the problem with this rich man?

Listen again to what this rich man says:

*Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull 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.’*

In those two sentences, he uses the terms “I” and “my” eight times. No mention of anyone else. No thought of family, community, or any other creature. This is the epitome of the spiritual disease for which greed is the symptom. The name of this particular spiritual disease is selfishness...or more specifically, self-centeredness.

People who are self-centered don’t really love themselves very well. Selfishness is not driven by self love; it is driven by fear; the fear of scarcity, that there will never be enough to fill the terrible void in their lives.

The rich man in the story is so afraid of scarcity, that he decides to store all his grain in bigger barns, even though he most likely never use all that grain in a lifetime...it would probably simply rot there in his barns.

How can we stop living in fear of scarcity which leads to lonely and self-centered lives? We begin by more clearly identifying the problem. To do that, we turn to our reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

*Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).*

Idolatry...the worship of anything or anyone other than Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. God must come first, even before our own lives.

It is tempting to make ourselves into little gods, as the rich man in the parable did, imagining he had complete control over his destiny. That is a form of idolatry...imaging that the self is the center of the universe...that as long as we are satisfied, as long as we have our place in the sun, then to hell with everyone else. After all, we imagine ourselves to be God. We have made the self into a false idol.

So what is the cure to this spiritual disease, whose symptom is greed, and whose root is self centeredness, a type of idolatry?

We recall Jesus' summary of the law:

*'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'*

We begin by loving God. We keep our focus on God. We recognize that all we have, the food we eat, the talents we are blessed with, and our very lives are all gifts from God. When we begin to count our blessing, the fear of scarcity begins to fade, and is replaced by the joy of the abundant life, a life in which we see how blessed we have been by God.

And that leads to the second part of the summary..."You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We learn what love is all about through our relationship with God. When we see clearly the depth of God's love, we are naturally drawn to be a blessing to others, to be conduits of God's love, God's grace out in the world.

There's nothing wrong with being rich. There's nothing wrong with enjoying a few creature comforts. But let us avoid the lie of this world, encouraged by almost every form of advertisement we see, that it's the one with the most toys in the end who wins. No, you can't take it with you.

Finally, I want to remind you of the collect of the day appointed for last Sunday, which I think fits very well with our lessons for this Sunday:

*O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

May we keep our focus on God, and, in the words of Thomas a Kempis, "*Use things temporal, but desire things eternal.*"