

sermons at saint mark’s

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THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 4, 2019

ECCLESIASTES 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; PSALM 49:1-11; COLOSSIANS 3:1-11; LUKE 12:13-21

**GIFTS OF GOD**

[**Luke 12:13-21:** *Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "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?' 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.' But God said to him, `You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. 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.*"]

Eighteen years ago, my husband and I stepped into a Babies R Us for the first time. It was an important rite of passage, that first visit to the baby store, because it was the day we filled out a baby registry. You know...the wish list where new parents declare to family and friends what they think they need for a newborn.

It was exciting, this inaugural outing to the big box version of all things baby. As soon-to-be parents, we loved getting ready for this new human being. Imagining what could be for our daughter gave us so much joy then just as it does now. That first time in the store, the reality of Madeline’s presence grew stronger as we looked at clothes, toys, bottles, and a crib. We patted ourselves on the back when we selected a myriad of outlet safety covers and baby monitors for her.

Then it came time to pick out a stroller, because, of course, newborns need strollers! ...and that’s when everything unraveled in spectacular fashion. We couldn’t figure out how to open the first stoller. Then, the second one pinched one of our hands when we tried to close it. Every other stroller had some kind of issue that made each one impossible to use. Even the simple umbrella strollers were too much for us. I clearly remember wondering how was it possible for two people with six college degrees between us to fail so miserably. When I looked at Chris and burst into tears, that’s when we knew we’d had enough. We fled the store exhausted and defeated. What we had done?!

In today’s gospel today, Jesus offers another story about the perils of stuff. The set-up is simple enough. A man intercepts Jesus and asks Jesus to arbitrate his family’s estate. Jesus refuses, because Jewish law is clear about what to do in those situations. Then Jesus tells the brother to stop worrying about the stuff. Riches in God’s realm aren’t about amassing more and more of the treasured family estate. Riches in God’s eyes are about something else altogether.

At one level, this is a warning to us about the unhealthy relationships people have with money and possessions. It is timeless, this wrestling human beings have with stuff. That is why throughout the gospels, Jesus warns us about the dangers of wealth. The rich young ruler sulks when he learns he must give away everything to follow Jesus. An older brother becomes increasingly outraged when his younger brother receives an advance on his inheritance, blows through it, and then has the audacity to come home seeking forgiveness.

There are modern, real-life parables. For the last several weeks, I’ve been fascinated by the proliferation of self-storage facilities in our neighborhood. Within three miles of my house, there are seven separate storage facilities that are business. The newest one will open any day now. Ironically, it is located across the street from the only tiny house community in the neighborhood. What’s more, many of the storage units exceed the standard size of each tiny home. Then there are the guns. I would be remiss today, of all days, if I didn’t talk about this. Did you see the news story last week about children’s backpacks that are now for sale? The ones that are bullet proof? I don’t know about you, but that makes me so sad. What is wrong with us that elementary school kids need bullet proof backpacks? Somehow our possessions have found a way to possess us, not the other way around. No wonder Jesus is always on us about the hazards of our stuff. I, for one, am glad he is. We need to hear more of it. Maybe eventually, some of that teaching will sink into.

When the rich fool congratulates himself for his bumper crop, he makes at least two mistakes. First, he takes credit for something that is not his alone to claim. He loses sight of the fact that his harvest is really a reflection of God’s abundance. His good fortune is actually a gift from God for the people. ...and that’s where he makes his second mistake. The rich fool decides to keep it all this abundance for himself, tucked safely away in up in larger and larger storage units. What’s more, he uses a single line scripture from the Book of Ecclesiastes to justify his decision. Save up, so there will be more to eat, drink, and be merrier. The teacher of Ecclesiates looks for some deeper meaning to make sense of life’s challenges. The rich fool looks for any justification at all to pat himself on the back. Now that’s vanity.

We are a people of the incarnation. We are formed of the earth by God to carry out the ongoing work of God. We are the gifts of God formed as the people God. Through those same earthly materials, God meets us and blesses us through Jesus. Jesus is the gift from God for the people of God. The material goods of this world are not inherently bad. Quite the opposite in fact. Instead, the incarnation affirms the goodness of the created order, including all the material treasures of the earth. But sometimes, we get confused. Our love of stuff outweighs our love of God. Sometimes, our need for stuff even outweighs our need for God and each other. And that’s when things begin to unravel in spectacular fashion. That’s also when it’s time to take a break and do some deep reflection about how we’ve gotten ourselves into the mess we’re in and what could do next.

Later today, 15 youth from across the diocese will join former Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, Saint Mark’s youth minister Nicole Slivernale, and several others on a pilgrimage across the Olympic Peninsula. For the next week, they will spend time learning about efforts to save the resident orca population, salmon restoration along the Elwha River, and the benefits of marine sanctuaries along the Pacific Coast. That’s only part of what they will do though.

Pilgrimages are more than a series of stops along a carefully planned route. Pilgrimages are also spiritual practices. They help people listen carefully to the questions that well up within them. They also give people time to reflect...to wonder what in their own lives is unraveling and what might be coming together.

This week, pray for all of the pilgrims on their journey. ...and also know this. They are not the only ones engaged in this spiritual work. So are you. You, too, are all called listen and reflect on questions that well up within you. What’s enough? How will you know when you have enough? Who will help you figure out when you have more than enough? What will you do then?

Stewardship is about how we care for the gifts entrusted into our care. It is also about recognizing special moments of conversion in our lives: times when we discover some new insight that not only changes the way we understand the world, but also changes how we act in it. That’s what the youth pilgrimage is about. It’s also what Jesus is trying to get at in this gospel.

When Jesus tells the brother that life is about more than possessions, Jesus is really saying this. “Go, and do the hard work of relationship building and repair with your family. Move beyond the letter of the law to see the bigger picture. Then, you will discover your true inheritance. ...and, remember, without each other, that all that treasure is worthless.”

When I told my mom about the melt down at Babies R Us, she laughed. She reminded me that she and my dad had only a few things when they brought me home from the hospital. Then she offered some good motherly advice. Stop worrying about all the stuff. You already have all you need. Whether you realize it, it will be enough.

I’ve thought about that over the years. Almost nothing remains from all of that stuff we accumulated from Babies R Us so long ago. What is left over fits comfortably in a single grocery bag. Every one of those things is a gift from other people. They are treasures offered in love so that love might be extended to others. I think that’s what it means to be rich toward God. May we have the courage to offer all we have and all we are to our Creator, the One who is always rich toward us.

AMEN.



*Saint Mark’s Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark’s Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!*