

Proper 13 Year C

I love the parables in the Gospels? They playfully twist and turn our imaginations. They insist on our speculations. Most of the time the parables told by Jesus are cryptic, sometimes with double or hidden meaning...sometimes they are dripping with irony...they are often slippery to get a hold of... I'm thinking of the parable of the king who invites all of his friends and neighbors to a wedding banquet, and they all have an excuse not to go... so the king invites the street people to come instead... only to throw one of his guests out of the wedding party because he's improperly dressed. At first one is led to believe that in the parable the king is allegorical to God; but then the king throws the unsuspecting guest out of his house, and then we see that the parable is not about a generous and inclusive God calling people to the messianic feast, but about the capricious and impetuous behavior of power.... but today's parable hits head on... "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions." Those who spend their life storing up treasures...their life will be taken from them...and those who are "rich in God will live abundantly." We only have to hear this once every three years; this is the time wherein the preacher might choose to preach on the "Old Testament" reading...because storing up treasure, in whatever myriad

manifestation “storing up” means....storing up has become a hallmark of our culture in which consumption and the accumulation of wealth reigns supreme.....This is of course a recurring theme in Luke...this writer warning us time and again about the preoccupation with wealth and possessions, greed in short.... And greed is idolatry.

I’m reminded of a scene in an old Woody Allen movie of the summer of 1975 called *Love and Death*. Early on in the movie Boris the protagonist played by Woody Allen observes one of the townspeople of a Russian Jewish village calling across his uncle Andre’s fence....The neighbor entreats... “Andre, Andre are you now ready to sell me your land?” And Andre answers holding up literally a foot square of turf....and he says... “No Ivan, this land is not for sale!” It’s hilarious and absurd but sometimes the absurd points us to profound truth...and in this case, one is asked to question the notion that is there really such a thing as owning property....for in truth what things we have claim upon today... the generations will bear away, as the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it....after we are long gone whose stuff will it be.....some vain fool’s perhaps.

I believe that the author of Luke is saying that to live for our so-called possessions as an end unto themselves, that our lives will be required of us...our lives being all of our labor and love and creativity and passion...

and to spend that on self-interest alone drains us of the joy of living. It is a form of death in life, as T.S. Eliot puts it. Now I've heard preachers ladle out the guilt here...In fact I remember there was a church in Enterprise Al. whose late service was broadcast by a local Dothan radio station...The preacher's sermon was always wrapping up about the time we were on our way home from church... but one Sunday in the summer, the good pastor was on a roll. He was upbraiding his parishioners who had beach places, for not being in church, and pleasuring themselves on the Lord's day...of course I always marveled that he was speaking to the people who were actually there in church. So I'm not going to do that.

Guilt is not what Luke has in mind here. Moreover I think this is directed not so much to individuals but to the ethical practice of community, the priorities of the community... Luke, as the other Gospel writers endeavor, is trying in high rhetorical fashion to speak of a way of life...to cause us to recognize what life is all about.... He's speaking of the way of the Christ...the true way of life God intends for us...a way of life that brings life....and not just for the sake of the faithful, but for the sake of the world. In short, Luke is speaking of the means to the kingdom of God; and what can block us from that life....And because this is a parable, it is edgy...parables will try to push our buttons in any way they can...in this

case the mere mention of a wealthy landowner to Luke's audience, who would more likely be the workers of such land, working at the pleasure of the owner...and many of these landowners lived elsewhere...Such an introduction would have made them bristle...and Luke would surely have their attention, as he no doubt gets ours.... But in our modern western context, the tables are turned. We are the landowner. We are the ones building bigger barns.

So let's look at this text: First we are told that the land produced abundantly...the landowner didn't produce the fruits...the land did...And then the landowner has a conversation with himself...there is no village, no neighbors...he's all alone...he refers to my land, my crops, my grain, my barns, my goods...in the Greek, the word *my* stands out as almost staccato in the narrative...Of course any good Jew or Jewish Christian of the day would have been taught in their study of Torah that the land, and all that comes from it, is God's...that we are sojourners in this life only by God's gracious favor...sojourners who tend the created order with all due care...and that what the land yields is to be shared...that's classic Torah...and the prophets over the ages stay red in the face telling his or her people that we are stewards of creation...And once we believe the delusion that we are to serve ourselves alone.... greed... that's when the trouble comes...We all know

that...the financial debacle in 2008 in the U.S. and in the world still playing itself out is an example.... The recent massive tax breaks for the wealthy and for corporations will be the next garish example...Luke is exhorting us to not waste our artistry on things that pass away, to waste our human artistry on things that have no life in themselves....things that divide and isolate...but to give our lives to the true and the good, a life that engenders artful fraternity:....brotherhood ...sisterhood....a community of equals. This parable is as much about gratitude as it is about anything else. Gratitude predisposes us to the good and the true.

But this is after all a parable, and certainly there must be a twist; and the twist is this, I think: It is not wealth that is being condemned; wealth is necessary...What is being condemned is foolishness... “You fool”, God says to the landowner...your love of possessions has sapped the life out of you....and he says to us that to truly live we must be rich in God.....rich in God.... What could that mean?

I think Luke is speaking of a predisposition here, this richness in God...a predisposition to live as God lives.... that all that we are and all that we have, our love, our labor, our creativity, our passion are all meant to serve the greater good...a life of sacrifice...the way God lives...that is God’s predisposition...to serve the good and the true.... We are to serve our

neighbor in short, being grateful for the privilege of doing so, and that is where we find life and life abundant. We are rich toward God in our sacrifice for the good of the other. Luke is saying in the words of Jesus that surely we now know enough not to be foolish; surely our faith is maturing; surely we know that wealth doesn't bring life. It is Love that is life giving. Only a fool would think otherwise... We are to unlock our store-houses of abundance for the good of the whole....and in so doing there is **life**.... Life that has ramifications all through the intimate connections of the human community.

Great things indeed can be done with wealth...indeed great things have been done and are being done with wealth....so the admonition today is to be wise with all that we are, our wealth and power, the state of our soul, the use of wealth and power a symbol of the state of our soul... a soul not alone but in artful community with others of conscience...the admonition is to not be foolish....

Now, having said all that, I believe this is hard work; and it requires our rapt attention (our being prayerful). It takes hard work, and it takes paying attention not to be a fool...It takes study and discernment and imagination... and vigilance ...but we're up to it by the wisdom we have in the way of Christ, which has everything to do with how we live and learn

with and from each other....And I think, at least according to Luke, I think that the first step is to recognize that we own nothing, that we possess nothing...that God owns everything...and that includes our very lives. We don't own our lives, our lives are borrowed, only to be returned...We don't own our lives...God does....and to claim that and to live into that is freedom and promise and joy and the abundant life we all seek...The true abundant life that is meant for all...the abundant life of sacrifice and generosity and hospitality that binds us in community.... Dare I say, brothers and sisters, binds us in a *functional family*...a freedom that feels like freedom.

We, brothers and sisters, being inhabitants of a wealthy land, are all wealthy according to the world's standards, some more than others...Luke in his writing didn't know about a middle class...and we also know that the Jesus movement had some wealthy patrons to provide for them...but the admonition still applies... Don't set your hearts and minds on wealth; don't worry about possessions....worry about the foolishness of a world that beguiles us into thinking that we are self reliant, that wealth itself is the prize, the singular goal; and that we should fear scarcity... There are preachers everywhere saying that if one just believes in God, the right way, then God will make you rich.... But that is foolishness. We are already rich as God's people... And don't believe the lies that powerful fools of our

world tell us. Have faith in the truth.... We are God's people.... people of the abundant life in Christ in which there is always enough....Don't worry about if you'll have enough...worry about the foolishness....Let us not be fools abdicating our lives, but let us in God's grace become wise....wise for the world's sake....rich in God....rich in the art of life....rich in that which shall never pass away....We have come too far to be fools.