

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday August 1, 2010

Proper 13C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of our one, ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's Gospel lesson we find Jesus teaching to a crowd of thousands. It must have been quite a scene – Jesus at the center, teaching, as the people press down upon Jesus and his disciples and strain to hear what Jesus is saying. In the middle of his teaching someone in the crowd interrupts him with what my army drill instructors would have called a “personal problem” and shouts out – “Teacher, tell my brother to split the family inheritance with me.” My drill sergeant would have told him, “Soldier, your personal problem is keeping you from getting with the program!” Jesus isn't quite so direct, but he uses the interruption as a teaching moment for the man who shouted out and the crowd by telling the story called the “Parable of the Rich Fool”.

Now parables are more than simple morality tales. They are meant to draw the listener in, engaging him with a story he or she can relate to and bringing their own lives into the narrative. Then, something unexpected happens or something doesn't make sense and the listener is left with questions about what the story means. There is usually no one correct answer. We have to enter the story and bring our own life experiences to it to find the answer.

In this parable, there has been a wonderfully big harvest. That's good, very good. It doesn't happen that often. In the Bible it usually meant a sign of God's grace and favor. The farmer decides to tear down his small barn and build a much bigger barn to store all this wonderful grain. Now, that's prudent. Didn't Joseph become Pharaoh's second-in-command by advising Pharaoh to store up the surplus grain to provide for the famine that was to come? Isn't it

just common sense to save a bit and put it aside when we can for a rainy day? Nothing unusual here.

The farmer is happy at his good fortune – who wouldn't be? The farmer decides to celebrate, to eat, drink and be merry. Sounds good to me. We all enjoy a party and isn't the Bible full of stories of celebration after a good harvest? "Party on!" Jesus' listeners would be thinking. And then God pulls the rug out from under this lucky man, calling him a fool, reminding him of his impending death and accusing him of not being rich towards God? A fool in Bible talk is someone who has forgotten about God – someone who thinks he doesn't need God.

"What's that all about?" they must have wondered. They would have to bring their own lives to the story to see that the man didn't recognize the good harvest as a gift from God. Come to think of it, he didn't even think of God, let alone thank Him. They would have to remember that this is no small farmer but a big landowner. He is no Joseph storing the surplus for the benefit of the community. No, he's holding the surplus off the market to keep prices up and then sell at even higher prices when supplies go down. He thinks he has it made in the shade until God, the Source of all that is and of all life, reminds him of his mortality. The man in this story can only think about himself: his crop, his barn, his good fortune. Yes, even his life. That's where he slips up. He has even forgotten that his very being is a gift from God and now God calls him on it!

Like the Rich Fool, the man who interrupted Jesus had lost his focus, he lost sight of what matters, indeed, he forgot about who he is and where he is. He was so preoccupied by his financial problem, that he couldn't even listen to what Jesus is saying. That was the same problem we saw a couple of Sundays ago when Jesus chided Martha. Martha's problem wasn't the work she was doing or that her sister Mary wasn't helping her. Martha's problem was that she lost sight of why she was doing the work. Her focus was on herself or her sister and she forgot that she was giving the gift of hospitality to Jesus.

This week I went stand-up paddle boarding for the first time. My instructor told me that as soon as I get up, I should look straight ahead to where I am going. He said, “If you look down at the water, that’s where you’ll end up!” He was right! Come to think of it, my yoga instructors always tell us to pay attention to where our eyes go, since where the eyes go the body will follow. That is what I think Jesus is getting at. He’s asking us to look at ourselves and ask what is important to us, what do we really value, why do we do what we do? When we are clear about that, our lives will follow!

In the parable of the rich fool, the issues are greed and self-centeredness. The problem with selfishness and greed is not just their harmful affects on the community but also their self-destructive effects on the individual. That is true of all the vices listed in our reading from Colossians. Martha was distracted by many things and so she lost focus of what was important. The rich fool became fixated on one thing and that distorted his values and sense of himself. It is all about discerning – discovering - what is important, what has lasting value what makes us whole and healthy and balanced.

Distractions like Martha’s cloud our vision and judgment. Let’s face it, no one sets out to make stupid decisions! There are two ways this usually happens: 1. When information is overlooked in our haste or is simply misunderstood. This we can usually easily correct when we check our information or assumptions again - “OH, I get it now!” 2. When frames of reference – the hardware of our thinking process – are distorted and prevent us from seeing reality. This not so easily fixed. Sometimes they become so entrenched that they are almost impossible to change. It is similar to a virus invading our hard drive and rendering it incapable of functioning correctly. That’s what makes things that distort our vision of the good so self-destructive. It not only causes us to make bad decisions, but eventually makes us incapable of making good and wise decisions.

Jesus ended his lesson with a warning – don’t fail to be rich towards God! What did he mean? Do you remember a couple of weeks ago Jesus asked the lawyer who challenged him that

same question? When the lawyer answered loving God with all our heart mind and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves, Jesus told him he was right. But how do we do this? That is the tricky part.

First it helps to be always mindful of who God is and what God is like. Our reading today from Hosea helps. Take the bulletin home with you and read it again. God is described as a loving parent who lifts up an infant to his face, who bends down to feed him up, who teaches him how to walk and who heals and nurtures him. This tells us not only what God does for us but shows us that God, like any good parent, is willing to change and adjust his interests and life to accommodate the new life God has brought into being. That's huge! It commands a response. But what can we give to God? God throughout all history has given us the answer to that: Loving our neighbor and all Creation as the Good Samaritan did should be our response. This is how we partner with God and help make Creation a better place.

Let us pray: Lord, send your Spirit upon us to make us always aware of your love and care for us so that we may always live in a place of gratitude that enables us to see your loving presence in each other and in all creation.

AMEN.