

Pentecost 8 Proper 13 – Year C – Track 2 - 8-4-2019

As is my habit, I checked out various commentaries on the Scriptures for today when I was preparing my homily. I read several sermons others had written. I confess I was almost looking for a “canned” sermon I could simply use today – because I am feeling pretty well spent after this past week. But mostly what I saw were platitudes...and persons saying that we have to avoid the extremes of giving away everything or hoarding everything for ourselves and choose that Anglican “middle way.”

The messages I heard myself in these readings, though, were twofold. First is a message about greed – and the second is a message about legacy.

The letter to the Colossians spells it out very clearly: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).” There it is – in black and white. Greed is idolatry.

And if that is not clear enough for us, Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

Greed is defined as wanting more than we need. And it affects how we run our lives. New Testament Professor Matthew Skinner puts it this way: “Greed compels us to banish anyone who looks like they might threaten “what’s ours.” Likewise, idolatry constructs worldviews in which self-interest is the cardinal virtue.”

Think about that. Greed is behind how we look at, how we treat others. I can be greedy about the things I have, or the money, or the status I have. I can be greedy with my time. *My* time is more important than yours... We’ve been on the receiving end of that, perhaps, when we’ve gone to a professional appointment and had to wait. But we can also be the ones greedy with our time. I don’t have *time* to listen to you... or help one day a month with clean and bright or call a friend I haven’t seen in way too long. Our greediness can take many forms, but where greed is, there – my friends – is idolatry. As Skinner said, “Idolatry constructs worldviews in which self-interest is the cardinal virtue.”

And this isn't something that happens only in our personal lives. This is a corporate thing as well. It is idolatrous when our worldview as a nation makes our self-interest the most important thing. That same self-interest that the wealthy fool displays in the parable – that makes him ask how he will continue to store up his wealth, without regard for anyone but himself – becomes a “value” when a nation considers only how to protect its own economic interests in foreign countries, without considering how our nation's policies affect the people *living* in those foreign countries.

And greed shows itself even in our corporate body that is the church. We, as the national *and* the local church, can be greedy in how we try to hold on to what we have – be that tangible assets or traditions that seem etched in stone – when those things and traditions and ways of doing things become idols in themselves.

Both the first reading from Ecclesiastes and the Gospel carry a warning about trying to build up a lot of *stuff*. The “Teacher” speaking in Ecclesiastes essentially concludes that all our work and achievements and accumulation are just so much hot air. When we reach the end, what will it all matter? I found it interesting that the gospel line we heard translated as, “This very night your life is being demanded of you,” might be better translated as “This very night *they* are demanding your life,” – with the “They” being all the possessions stored up. Sometimes it is not that we possess *things* – but that these *things* begin to possess *us*. They control what we do, and how we do it. If the farmer was going to keep all the bountiful crop only for himself, he had to make more space in which to store it...

Professor Elisabeth Johnson wrote, “A seasoned pastor once said, “I have heard many different regrets expressed by people nearing the end of life, but there is one regret I have never heard expressed. I have never heard anyone say, ‘I wish I hadn't given so much away. I wish I had kept more for myself.’” Death has a way of clarifying what really matters. Our lives and possessions are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. We rebel against this truth because we want to be in charge of our lives and our stuff.” There's the greed and idolatry again. *Our* lives...*our* stuff.

I said that the second message I got from today's readings was about Legacy. Yesterday we celebrated the requiem liturgy for Stanley Beard, Sr. Linda-Susan's father – and my "dad", too, for the 40 years I had known him. He passed on in the early hours of Wednesday morning. On Thursday I went back down to the AFC home in Ithaca where he had living since mid-December to pack up the things in his room. After 102 years of living, what he had left fit in the trunk and back seat of my Ford Focus. Letting go of so many things, *losing* most of what he had accumulated through his lifetime, was a deep tragedy for him. But it made the legacy he left for his family and friends so much more clear. What he left for us all were his values, his faith, his integrity, his love. The example of his life was the treasure he passed on.

My friend Rev. Bob Bond says this in his homily for today: "Our legacy is the ways in which we make this world a better place. It isn't about how much we have when we die, it is about how much we have done before we die. The farmer in the parable Jesus taught was not a fool because he produced a bumper crop too large to fit in his barns. He was a fool because he thought it most important to store up all he had so he could have an easy life rather than looking for the ways in which his abundance could be shared. God wants us to think about what we have to share and not about how much we can store up for ourselves. When we store up for ourselves, our faith is in what we can do. When we share generously from what we have, our faith is in God."

So here are the questions for the week: What am I being greedy about? What are the idols in my life that are, perhaps without my even knowing it, affecting how I see and treat others? What are the idols in this country of ours? What are the idols in this church?

And how can we assure that our greed and idolatry are not part of the legacy we leave for those to come after us?

There are no easy answers, but we can wrestle with the questions together.

Amen.

- [Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23](#)
[Psalm 49:1-11](#)
[Colossians 3:1-11](#)
[Luke 12:13-21](#)