



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13
St. Mark's on the Campus
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There's a curiosity in our gospel this morning that is worth spending some time with. Jesus tells his followers this parable about the rich man who has a conversation with himself and decides the way to handle all his excess wealth is to build bigger barns so that he can hoard it -- and take it easy. God points out the man's folly to him and says, "This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

This translation -- as is true, actually about most translations of the text -- makes it sound as if God is demanding the man's life, in other words that he's dying. Certainly there's plenty worth pondering there. But the Greek text actually says something a bit different. It says, "This night *they* are demanding your soul of you." That sounds more like the *goods* that this man has accumulated and hoarding in the barns are demanding his soul rather than God. In other words, this man's great wealth is owning him and not the other way around.

As far as I know, few of us have vast barns of wealth put aside so that we can eat, drink and be merry. But I wonder if in some ways that makes it far more tempting to think that Jesus isn't addressing all of us with his words, that because we don't have the vast wealth portrayed in the parable, the images don't apply to us. Of course, vast wealth is a relative matter, and certainly when we put ourselves alongside some other parts of the world, we all are wealthy indeed. It appears to be part of the nature of possessions that our hearts can always make room for wanting more of them. A nicer car. A newer house or an old house with everything already done to it that needs to be done -- not that I'm speaking out of personal experience of course!

Actually I'm the first to acknowledge how deeply I am called to hear Jesus' warning to beware of all kinds of greed. Some years ago, my wife, Carol, once said to me – probably when I was resisting giving away some of my books – that books were for me a source of security. And you know that awful feeling you sometimes get in the pit of your stomach, when you're confronted with something that you don't really want to admit about yourself but you know is true? I felt that feeling that day. So of course I initially denied what she said. But her comment has stuck with me over the years, and I have to admit that I took a certain pleasure in myself recently when we were creating an office space for Ryan and I gave away half of the books that were in that room. Now if I can only keep myself from buying them back at the book sale

There is certainly a way in which our possessions claim our lives. I've been pondering this a lot lately as we've spent time and money on our house this summer. There's a certain freedom we relinquish when we buy a house. Sure, when we rent, the space is not ours to do with as we wish. And when we buy, it is ours – for better and worst! A house, like all our possessions, makes demands on us. It needs things, it requires our resources of time, money and energy. Just as cars do and MP3 players and computers and – I suppose – even books. We are tied to our possessions, in ways similar to our ties to relationships with other people in our lives, including our relationship with God.

Therein, I suppose, lies the rub. We cannot be free from possessions any more than we can be free from relationships with the people in our lives. We relate to everyone and everything around us, and relating requires our resources. Finite resources. I recall learning a painful lesson about finite resources as a senior in high school. I was in a variety of leadership positions at that point, President of the Band, President of National Honor Society; I was also involved in other activities, including yearbook and the school newspaper. In other words, I was a busy guy, loving it all, along with loving a particular young lady who occupied some of my time. Actually there were two young ladies that year - but not at the same time. By the time I reached the end of the year, I found that I had truly bitten off more than I could chew. I was way overburdened and ended up not doing a good job with some of my commitments because I simply did not have the time to spend on all that I was relating to! Finite resources.

Given the reality that God has created us as limited human beings, part of our life's work is to embrace our finitude as a gift; to live into our limitations, and grow to understand ever more deeply that God is calling us to do some things, to spend our resources in some ways, and not in others.

One example for me is that there's a deep awareness on my part that if I don't have my relationship with God in order through continual nurture and care, in other words by continually feeding that relationship with my time, my attention, my energy -- then not much else will be in order, either. Coupled with that awareness is the equally strong awareness that many relationships compete for my finite time and attention, including my relationship with the things in my life. Like all of you, I would say those things are secondary -- secondary to the relationships with people, and certainly secondary to my relationship to God.

But I would be naïve, foolish even, not to recognize that the things in my life create their own pull, they make their own demands -- and I must always be on the lookout that I am not devoting too many of my finite resources -- money, time, energy -- on relating to things entrusted to my care rather than to people entrusted to my care -- and who care for me in return.

Over the years, I've come to appreciate more and more the discipline of the tithe as a way to help keep unfaithful tendencies in check. Of course a tenth of anyone's income is a significant amount. That's the whole point. The point isn't the *particular* amount. It's that tithing is a powerful spiritual discipline to help us keep things -- both figuratively and literally, to keep *things* -- in perspective. To understand that we all rely on God all the time, not on ourselves. And to understand that with finite resources, we need to be sure that we are devoting those resources to God, that we are, to us the words of our gospel this morning, not storing up treasures for ourselves while not being rich toward God.

You see, tithing isn't about supporting the ministry of the church; that's simply a byproduct of the spiritual discipline. Tithing is about growing in our faith, in our trust and reliance on God. Ultimately it's about growing in our own ministry as part of the body of Christ. As we participate in such spiritual disciplines we hear demands made of us, too. Demands on our finite resources. But demands that free us rather than bind us. Free us to serve God and our neighbor with joyful hearts – that free us, as we say in one of our dismissals, to “go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.”

Thanks be to God.