

Sermon for Proper 13, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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I love the book of Ecclesiastes. That may sound like a strange statement. But try reading it the next time you are dealing with depression. The kind of day when you feel like everything is meaningless and worthless, and you're not sure why you bother with anything at all. On one of those days, if you read Ecclesiastes, you will find that the wisest and richest of men agrees with you. It seems that wisdom and riches don't make things any better for him than for you. There isn't anything that you could have or do that would make it all better. "Yes, everything is meaningless and worthless, except your relationship with God. Now get back to business." It's very refreshing.

This is helpful, because Satan will get us with whatever he can use. Our culture is practically founded on the great utopian faith of the last two centuries, that Progress is inexorable and will eventually perfect all things. We think that if only we would throw enough money at scientists, we would be able to eradicate disease. We think that if only we understood our enemies, they would become our friends. We think that if only we understood ourselves, we would be able to control our negative behavior. We think that if only we had a certain kind of political or economic system, it would solve the political and economic problems of the world.

But the error in these beliefs is not in their specific prescriptions. Science is a good thing. Understanding ourselves and our enemies are good things. Certain political and economic systems do solve certain problems. But none of these things is a magic bullet that will inevitably make everything better. The error here is one that comes on every scale. It's the "If only..." And we all have them. If only I can get this job. If only I can get married. If only I can make more money. If only [fill in the blank], then everything will be better. But that simply isn't the case. It is a lie of the devil that he uses to try to draw us away from God.

Jesus obviously was familiar with Solomon's writings, because he echoes Solomon's words in our Gospel reading. The parable of the rich fool teaches essentially the same lesson as Ecclesiastes. "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Of course we have reduced this counsel to a number of cliches. "You can't take it with you." "Money can't buy you happiness." The list could go on.

But Jesus makes a connection here that we might not immediately make. The incident that inspired the parable is something that we might see as a call for justice. “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” It seems to us like a reasonable request, but Jesus hears, “If only...”

You see, it’s not just that you can’t take it with you. It’s that everything that belongs to this world is under judgment. It will all be destroyed. And when that happens, Jesus himself will be the final judge over the living and the dead, and he will reign over an eternal kingdom. And the only thing this man wants from the Lord of life is money.

He has made this inheritance issue the thing that will save him. We don’t know the legal particulars of the case, but Jesus sees the heart of the man. And he finds there something that draws him away from God, something that replaces God. So Jesus names this unholy desire for what it is, covetousness, a violation of the law. The money has not been given to him, but he has made it the thing on which his happiness depends.

St. Paul boils it down one step further for us in Colossians. Covetousness, he says, is idolatry. If you want what God has not given you, and you make the possession of it the final instrument of your happiness, then you have displaced God in your heart. You have said, “I don’t want God. I want that thing that I know will make me happy.” You may as well have said that you are no longer going to worship God, but instead are planning to erect a shrine to Moloch in your back yard.

The antidote to all this, Jesus says, is to be “rich toward God.” Most people believe that the primary reason for the tithe is to support the work of the church. That’s one reason, but it’s not the primary reason. The primary reason for tithing is not to support the work of God. God doesn’t need your money. He’ll get it elsewhere if it suits his purposes. The primary reason for the tithe is to kill the “If only...” If you’re not giving what God asks of you, you’re hoarding.

Covetousness. Idolatry. You think that money is going to take care of you better than God will. On the other hand, if you are giving, the next time you put your envelope in the plate, you can imagine yourself giving the devil one in the eye. “God will take care of me, Satan. So there.”

But being rich toward God entails more than just giving money. If only's lead to all kinds of aberrations. St. Paul gives us a couple of lists in our Epistle reading. Fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk. These are earthly things. They are under judgment and will be destroyed. And St. Paul tells us to put these things to death.

And then he paints a picture of the kind of community where people are doing this. The divisions will cease. We will no longer know each other by these earthly associations that are under judgment. Instead, once the earthly has been stripped away, "all and in everything Christ." Once you rid yourself of that which is not eternal, all you have left is that which is eternal. And everything that is eternal finds its source in Jesus. Everything.

So we put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, and forbearance. We forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven us. We love each other as we love our own bodies. Because we are one body in Christ. We tell each other the truth. We soak up everything the Lord has to teach us, in the Word of the Bible, from Jesus, from each other. And we call each other deeper into that mystery of Christ, which *is* all and is *in* all.

This is what it would look like to live in a community of people who have given themselves to Jesus. All of these things follow from knowing that we are chosen, set apart, and loved by God. Instead of "If only..." we can simply be thankful that Christ is the ultimate source and end of all things. All of our needs are met in him. And since he is rich toward us, we can be rich toward him in money and in righteousness.