

PROPER 13, PENTECOST 11, JULY 31, 2022

How many of us have a garage that can no longer have a car parked in it because it is filled up with so much other “stuff?” How many of us have attics or basements filled because we have too much “stuff”?

The late comedian George Carlin famously did an entire monologue on stuff — proclaiming that the “meaning of life is trying to find a place to put your stuff” and that “A house is just a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff.” Pretty funny. The reality is we all have too much stuff. But what’s not funny are hoarders who are unable to throw anything away, their whole identity, and I mean every aspect of their life, is defined by their collected piles of stuff. Unless they are surrounded, indeed drowning, in their “stuff,” their lives have no meaning.

Perhaps you think you are not “stuff prone” or “stuff inclined?” Do you have an online automatic back-up system? Does your computer, iphone or ipad send everything you file to the all-knowing and all-saving “Cloud” so that you don’t ever lose any of your on-line “stuff?” Even if you don’t have boxes of odd papers, old clothes, broken tools, or toys squirreled away in some physical storage space, chances are you’ve got old files, months of e-mails, forgettable photos, and just general information of “stuff” all safely cared for by an unseen tech savvy security system. No matter how high tech your “treasures” might be, they are still “stuff.”

In today’s gospel Jesus makes it all too clear how “life” and “stuff” are not one and the same. The rich man, enjoying a bumper crop, congratulates himself on his plans for safely storing all his valuable stuff, and looks forward to a future devoted to relaxing, eating, drinking, and making merry. Nice visualization — until God informs him that this is the last day of his life and all those big, new storage units, all that wealth, all that “stuff” is not going with him.

What is it that Jesus finds most offensive, most unfaithful, in this rich man’s fantasy of his future? It is not eating and drinking and being merry. Jesus did that all the time. It is not relaxing and taking joy in life. Jesus did that all the time.

So what is the rich man’s problem? It is his focus on himself — to the exclusion of all others. Idolatry beings with an “I,” and this affluent agricultural entrepreneur has a focus in life that is fixated on “I.” He asks himself how he should deal with his good “problem” of over-abundance. He congratulates himself on the answer he comes up with that benefits only himself.

The rich man determines he will rip down his too-small structures, erect huge new storage spaces, and live a long and carefree life off all the proceeds that will be gained from these clever actions. But at no time, at no place, in no part of this I conversation, does this man factor other people, not even family, into his deliberations or invite God’s participation in his decisions.

No question about it, the rich man is possessed by greed. This is nothing new. Remember the film “Wall Street” where the main character Gordon Gecko says “greed is good”. And it doesn’t have to be greedy about money. We can be greedy for many things — for food, fame, beauty or power. What is endemic in our culture is the belief that self-interest –taking care of ourselves and acquiring as much as we can, is far more favorable than self sacrifice which is far different that the members of the early church.

The first believers "had everything in common. They ascribed to what we would call communal living. They sold all their possessions and goods, then gave to anyone as

they had need. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. There were no needy persons among them. Financial generosity was combined with social generosity. Personal piety and social justice weren't separated. The early believers subverted normal social hierarchies of wealth, ethnicity, religion, and gender in favor of a radical egalitarianism before God and with each other. In the words of this week's epistle, "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

We look askance at any group that subscribes to communal living partly because we live in a society based on a very high level of consumerism. And for many people we are what we have. Ask yourselves this questions, "But if I am what I have and I lose what I have, who am I then? This parable offers no answer to that question. It does however, raise the issue of life's meaning and priorities.

Jesus talks about money and possessions more than just about any other topic. Why? Because there's something about it that distorts us. Something that makes us defensive. Something that makes it very hard for us to hear the Gospel in its risky, scandalous, radical fullness. There is something in the allure of money and possessions that grabs hold of us and doesn't easily let go. Like the rich farmer, we are tempted to think that having large amounts of money and possessions stored up will make us secure and Jesus is not telling us that securing one's future or being rich is wrong. However, sooner or later, we learn that no amount of wealth or property can secure our lives. No amount of wealth can protect us from a genetically inherited disease, for instance, or from a tragic accident. No amount of wealth can keep our relationships healthy and our families from falling apart. In fact, wealth and property can easily drive a wedge between family members, as in the case of the brothers fighting over their inheritance at the beginning of this text.

It is all about priorities. It is about who God truly is in our lives. It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts that God has given us. It is about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: either we are aligned toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our neighbor, toward God's mission to bless and redeem the world.

It also comes down to what it means to be rich. Are you rich with wealth and stuff or are you rich in God? The person rich in the matters of God has a grateful heart rather than a grasping hand. Being rich in the matters of God inevitably means that we are looking for ways to share God's gifts with others. The person rich in the matters of God is not focused on satisfying every want and creature comfort, before considering the needs of others.

To put in more concretely, rich in the matters of God requires sharing generously our resources to assist with God's work in the world. It means seeking opportunities to help those who are most in need. It means guarding against greed instead of obsessing over fairness and asking hard questions about what makes us feel secure or insecure. It means acknowledging that even our hard-earned, well-earned, self-earned wealth comes from God and belongs to God. It means prioritizing human interconnectedness over personal gain and dialoguing with God more than we monologue with ourselves.

Finally to put it into another perspective think about this. If you had to write your obituary how would you like to be remembered. What would you like your epitaph to say about you? Alfred Nobel was forced to face that question. One morning in 1888, Nobel was quite surprised to read his own obituary in a French newspaper. Obviously, it was a

journalistic mistake. One of his brothers had died, and a careless reporter had used a prewritten obituary of the wrong man.

But as he read, Nobel was shocked and deeply disturbed to learn what the world really thought of him. He was seen simply as the dynamite king, the merchant of death, who had amassed a great fortune out of explosives. Nobel had hoped his inventions would be useful to people and to nations; yet he was viewed as one who dealt in blood and war for profit.

At that moment, Alfred Nobel resolved to show the world the true purpose of his life. He revised his will so that his fortune would be dedicated to the recognition of great creative achievements – with the highest award going to those who had done the most for world peace. From then on Nobel's image began to change. Now, over a century later, we remember him the way he wanted to be remembered. Today, we all associate him with the Nobel Peace Prize. Alfred Nobel learned what it means to become rich in the matters of God.

Let us all pray today for the grace and the wisdom to grow rich in the matters of God. Amen.