

**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 31, 2016**  
**Luke 12:13-21**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

Last Sunday we began a sermon series that will continue for the next several weeks, focused on exploring and answering the question “Who is Jesus?” – for us individually, and for Trinity parish. Last week, in Luke’s gospel we learned that Jesus was a devout Jewish man, a teacher who was passionate about two things – God and God’s kingdom. Prayer was the primary way Jesus taught and showed us how to know God and to be engaged actively in God’s kingdom work. We heard Luke’s version of Jesus’ model prayer and prayed it together as we always do during the Eucharist - in the Lord’s Prayer.

Today’s gospel reading suggests two other hallmarks of who Jesus is: Jesus is all about living the rich life, and he is a “meddler” in our very personal business.

For just a moment, think back over your life and try to identify a time when you felt really rich. For me, it was around age 25. I had moved in with 89 year old Nettie Tappan Horn, to be a live-in caregiver, though I really didn’t do all that much care-giving. It was more like I was insurance for her family in case something happened to Nettie during the night. She had vision in only one eye, was a little hard of hearing, and was a bit unsteady on her feet. But Nettie did all her own personal care, and sometimes a bit of cooking. At that time I was working full-time as a case manager at a state facility for the developmentally challenged in Sussex County, Delaware. Nettie lived in a fairly large older home on an ocean block in Rehoboth Beach, DE. After I moved in with Nettie, I settled into active involvement in the music ministry of Epworth United Methodist Church, which was in the same block just down the street from Nettie’s home, #10 Baltimore Avenue. I directed the Epworth church choir, and regularly played in the pit orchestra for the local community theater group. Nettie was a native of Sussex County, and was interested in the performing arts, the environment – especially the health of the Chesapeake Bay, and politics. She loved to have friends and family come visit her, and she especially loved throwing lobster parties for those near and dear to her. I found Nettie, her life stories and opinions fascinating.

My life was rich in so many ways during the three years I lived with Nettie. I had meaningful work and personal friendships; a dynamic faith community where I could learn and grow and use my gifts; employment that was appealing and directed to serving others; I enjoyed good health; and of course, for a native girl born and raised in

the Central PA mountains, there was the wonder and awe of living at the ocean. For me at that time, this was a pretty exotic experience!

When I compare my life now, to the way I lived then, it's quite different. When I was 25, I didn't own nearly as much "stuff" as I have now. I did not have two Master's degrees. I did not own a home nor need to rent an apartment, and I had little furniture, and very few debts. I had a single room of my own with a stereo and small TV, a modest wardrobe, a window fan, a bike, and a car. I had use of the kitchen and living room area in Nettie's home, which was modestly spacious. There was no air conditioning and no dishwasher in the house. Nettie encouraged me to invite guests to visit overnight whenever I wanted.

I didn't have a lot of money or own nearly as much stuff as I do now, but I was rich in every way that was important to me. The extra "stuff" that fills my home now has not really made me all that much happier than I was at age 25.

I think this is what Jesus was getting at in today's gospel – challenging his hearers to think about their ultimate values, and what really makes for a rich life. Jesus sidesteps the conflict some siblings are having over distribution of the family inheritance. Instead, Jesus takes this opportunity to offer a word of warning about the slippery slope of material wealth and how it can lead to greed. He cares about this so much that he boldly steps over the line and meddles with his hearers' understanding of what holds ultimate value, because Jesus is all about inviting others – which includes us - to live a rich life, rich toward God. He proceeds to tell a parable to show how a life rich in wealth and possessions can get in the way of living rich toward God.

Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus say riches and possessions are bad or evil. Yet wealth and its use was a topic Jesus talked and taught about more frequently than anything else, except for hypocrisy. Jesus had a lot to say about how powerfully seductive riches and possessions can be for us. They can be very distracting and can become the little "g" gods that we give ourselves to, that we worship. We can end up being rich in things and poor in soul.

There's nothing to indicate that the rich land owner in Jesus' parable was cheating or mistreating anyone or doing anything illegal. In all likelihood he was a good and smart man. And he simply had been blessed with a wonderful harvest that left him facing a decision about what to do with such a big bumper crop. Some would suggest that he was being a good steward by building bigger barns to store his surplus so it wouldn't rot and go to waste. There is nothing essentially greedy about this man.

But did you notice that this rich land owner seems to be all alone? There is no mention of God or anyone else in his life. Today some might call him a “self-made man” (though in truth, no such thing exists). He is quite self-absorbed; his only conversation is with himself. And it is punctuated with 1<sup>st</sup> person singular pronouns - “I, me, and mine”. It seems in his mind the decision about what to do with his bumper crop belongs solely to him – “What should I do? . . . I will do this”. He does not ask anyone for advice or suggestions about what he might do with the surplus, nor does he seem to think about the opportunity he has to share some of this blessed bounty with his neighbors. And there is no expression of gratitude to God. His focus is set on ensuring the security of his wealth, and then sitting back to enjoy it all. The rich man is not foolish because he makes provision **for** the future. He is foolish because he believes that his wealth can **secure** his future, can make him independent –from others, from need, from God.

In telling this story, Jesus bothers to “meddle”, to challenge his hearers because he cares, and truly wants every person to know the joy of a life lived rich toward God. Jesus dares to talk about money - something very personal to each of us, something pretty much taboo as a topic of conversation in our culture. I’m not sure that many of us think much about the connection between our relationship with wealth and our relationship with God. And I am not referring to the health and wealth gospel of some modern popular preachers – that teaches if you have faith, God will see to it that you prosper financially. Jesus knew what it means to be human, which is that we have everyday vulnerabilities and needs that remind us we’re mortal, created beings, always dependent on others, and most especially on God. Jesus knew that every person longs for security and love and acceptance. He knew that the allure of money only creates the illusion of independence and security.

Greed is an emotionally wired human default response. We are bombarded by well over 5,000 messages daily, enveloped in a culture which tells us that if we just had that new car or used this or that brand of toothpaste, if we had just a little more in the bank, if we just got the mortgage paid off, everything would be okay. The culture of desire creates discontent within us, leaving us entirely confused about what is “enough”. What greed does is cover up our feelings of vulnerability, insecurity and the desire for love.

The gospel suggests two questions it would be wise and faithful for us to ask ourselves regularly, even on a daily basis. The first question is, “What is it that makes my life rich and full?” The second question is, “Where will I look for security today?” Jesus surely knew that material things, no matter how fun and comforting, lovely and useful they may be, will never completely satisfy our deepest longings.

I have to admit that Jesus' loving meddling has gotten under my skin. In a sermon last October, I shared part of my struggle with giving intentionally and on a regular basis to the church. I said that I would begin to give 8% of my salary to Trinity, with the goal of eventually giving at least 10%. Thus far, I have been able to keep that promise (God be praised!). But now I'm feeling challenged to look at what I do with the other 92% of my money – which I think means I recognize that it's not my money, it's God's – all of it. Of course there are always bills to pay. And there are still some discretionary choices I have. Since 2013, I have not had cable TV in my home; I have chosen not to spend my money on that form of entertainment. There is nothing wrong with TV, and sometimes I do miss having it – like with the summer Olympics coming up. But I also know that I feel great relief from the constant bombardment of advertisements. I am a very visual person, so seeing something appealing can easily set me off on the path of thinking I need to have it.

It's not really surprising that Jesus talked so much about wealth. Decisions about how to use what we have been given help shape us into the people we become. And Jesus, who was passionate about God, would have us choose to live rich toward God. That is: grateful rather than entitled; focused on our relationships with God and others; faithfully using all that we have been given in love, for the sake of "this fragile earth, our island home" as one of our Eucharistic prayers says.

Decisions about how to use our wealth have always been, and will always be part of what it means to be a living human being. It is my hope that we will begin to have more frequent conversations about money – both the challenges and the opportunities it presents for growing our hearts rich toward God. The aim of such conversations is not to inflict guilt on anyone, nor just to ensure that Trinity Church will always be here. I believe Jesus understood how difficult it can be to live rich toward God. And Jesus knew God's heart. He knew that God wants to shape us into the divine image of One who gives in abundance and loves lavishly. For that kind of loving and giving is the only thing that can bring healing to our fragile and fractious world.

We receive from God's bounty every time we hold out our hands to receive the body of Christ, and the cup of his life poured out. We come to the Eucharist to have our desire met, not for possessions but to be possessed by a love that will not let us go. That is what truly satisfies. So come today, friends. Taste and see that God is good. Come to be strengthened to live with a heart rich toward God. Amen.