

Date: 5 August 2007

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 18

**SERMON: Getting Things Right**

Text(s): Luke 12:13-21; Colossians 2:20 - 3:4, 8-14

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I know that some of you have already been through the experience that Carol and I and our daughters and Carol's sister and her family had recently down in New Jersey— starting (and I emphasize the word starting) the massive job of cleaning out the family home where Carol's parents had lived for 57 years. Both of Carol's folks were "Depression kids;" and the way they thought about and handled things revealed just how much impact those years of economic hardship and struggle for their respective families had on them.

Very little of what came into that house ever went out; everything that had any possible potential use or reconfiguration into something that might be useful in the future was saved— department store gift boxes (how many of those have you saved in your attic or basement?), matches, nearly used up bits of soap, notepads from hotels, gathered in their travels— on and on the list goes. The house itself is not large, a 50's-vintage 1 ½ story Cape Cod with a full basement, full being the operative word. We filled a 15-foot dumpster just with things we found in the basement that had been deemed potentially useful, but never ended up being used. There's still at least a large pickup truckload of old tools, countless cans and boxes of screws and washers and bolts, etc. We also found some treasures— like all the letters Carol's mom and dad wrote to each other while he was fighting in the Pacific during World War II.

But while the Depression years may have made pack rats out of Carol's Mom and Dad, it didn't turn them into misers. They were two of the most generous people I've known, and their generosity was always very even-handed so that everyone always felt they had been treated fairly. Their charity was large and they gave

disproportionately of their resources to others. That spirit of generosity and fairness rubbed off on their own children and grandchildren, because when it came time to make decisions about who got what of things from their belongings in the house, there was no squabbling or jealousy or hurt feelings. Everyone got the things that mattered to them or seemed appropriate or willingly allowed someone else to take a particular item. As Carol said at one point when we were grouching about having to wade through so much stuff (and we're not done wading yet!), "Well, if the worst thing our parents did to us was to leave us with a lot of stuff to sort through and clean out, we're very, very fortunate and blessed." And I would have to agree.

Not all family inheritances are so easily or graciously divided, are they? In fact, inheritances are often the cause of families being divided, when one person or another feels they've been treated unfairly. And this is an old problem, as our gospel lesson for today makes clear. Inheritances are about things, or about money which represents things. And our reactions to inheritances usually are very revealing about our relationship to things or money. We like to pretend that money, or the things money represents, isn't all that important to us, but in fact, we know that it is. As one wag has put it, "When you hear someone say, 'It's not about the money,' it's about the money." Figuring out our relationship to material things has always been problematical, it seems. Often, we humans have tended to veer toward one of two opposite poles: either we set our hearts too much on things, and make them the ultimate reality in our lives— things become God for us, in which case we may feel either vaguely or hugely guilty; or on the other hand, we devalue or despise material things, and wish we could escape into some world of pure spirituality where things wouldn't be important.

But neither extreme will do. Things *are* important, and it matters, that we get our relationship to matter right— that we get *things* right. In our gospel lesson today, we see Jesus

warning against the first danger— the inordinate love of material things, which is probably the greater temptation for most of us who have so many things to love. The man who comes to Jesus to enlist Jesus' help in convincing his brother to divide the inheritance with him, is, like so many of us, focused primarily on material things. To be so focused is entirely natural. After all, we cannot escape the fact that we live in a world of matter. The ancient Chinese used to refer to the material world as the realm of "the ten thousand things." (I think I found all the ten thousand things in my in-laws' basement.) The rock singer Madonna is not the only "material girl;" we're all material girls and boys. We have material bodies that need water and spinach and lamb chops and ice cream or even occasionally champagne and *foie gras* to fuel them and keep them going. We do better if we have a roof over our heads than if we are exposed to the elements; we have to work with things like hammers or computers or account books to earn the money to provide those things for ourselves. And we can hardly avoid the material interaction of two bodies if we're going to reproduce ourselves and perpetuate our species. Of course, if the biogeneticists have their way, we may discover how to reproduce ourselves in test tubes without sex, though I can't imagine there will be a groundswell of popular support for such methods. There's no getting away from it— for better or worse, matter matters. The material world is the only world we have immediate and direct experience of.

The man in the story is probably a younger son in a culture and place where, in Jesus' day, the custom was that the eldest son inherited twice the portion of land as any other sons. So when this man comes to Jesus with the request that Jesus exhort his brother to divide the inheritance with him, it's probably because he's the younger brother who has only inherited half as much as his older brother. And Jesus correctly diagnoses his problem as one of greed. He's asking for more than what law and custom say is

his fair share. In his view, enough is never enough. He casts an eye on his brother's possessions and he covets a bigger share. His motivation is not need, but greed, as Jesus recognizes. Mahatma Ghandi once observed that the world has enough resources for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed. That's a truth that should be self-evident, but we don't ever seem to learn it, do we? If we did, we wouldn't be debating such things as the Kyoto protocols on the limits on emissions of the "greenhouse gases" or whether big corn growers in the Midwest should continue to get federal subsidies to grow corn to turn into high fructose corn syrup so that the food industry can put it in nearly everything we eat, making us into the fattest nation on earth.

So Jesus says, "*Beware of all kinds of greed,*" and proceeds to tell the parable of the rich fool who surveys his possessions, his things, with a self-satisfied eye and says, "Ah, I've got it all. I'm the master of all I survey. I'm a self-made man. I've worked hard for everything I've got, and I've earned the right to enjoy it." Sound like anyone you know?

Do you remember the comic strip "Calvin & Hobbes" that used to be in the papers? Calvin was a 5 year-old boy, and Hobbes was his stuffed toy tiger. For those of you who weren't familiar with this comic strip, let me just say that if every parent had a five year-old like Calvin, we would quickly lose the urge to reproduce, and the human race would have a very short future. Calvin's dad tells Calvin that he and Calvin's mother have decided to give Calvin a weekly allowance. Like good parents, they want him to begin learning how to manage money responsibly. Calvin's reaction on learning of this is to immediately get an evil grin on his face, and begin cackling to himself. "Mine, all mine. I can buy whatever I want; I can bribe people to do what I want them to do. I have power!" Whereupon his father turns to his wife and says, "Dear, I have the feeling this isn't going to work out quite like we intended."

So, in Jesus' story, God responds to the

rich materialist and says, “You fool. You thought that your ultimate happiness and security depended on your own ability to buy it with things. You forgot that you’re a mortal, you yourself are a material being and will one day go the way of all material things. On that day, the day of your own death, whose things will these be? *“So it is,”* concludes Jesus, *“with everyone who stores up wealth for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

We don’t have to look far to see contemporary examples of the Rich Fool, do we, perhaps no further than our own bathroom mirrors. Rich is a relative term; in relation to the top 1-2% within our own country, few, if any of us, are among the rich. But measured against most of the world, all of us probably fall within the wealthiest 5%. We constantly need to hear Jesus say to us, *“Beware of all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions.”* Every time our relationship to *things* prevents us from living justly or working for justice in society or from being generous givers, then our things have become idols— false gods.

If our gospel lesson cautions us against the danger of inordinate love of material things, then our epistle lesson cautions us against the opposite danger— the notion that material things, and bodily life are somehow unspiritual and therefore to be shunned, and this extreme attitude toward material things also has a long, and mostly dishonorable, history.

Apparently, within the Colossian church, founded by St. Paul, the notion that material things are inferior to spiritual reality had gained a fair amount of acceptance, resulting in some attempts to construct a rigid scheme of rules and regulations that involved a lot of self-denial and mortification of physical desires— in other words, an extreme form of asceticism. Asceticism comes from a Greek word that means practice or self-discipline or athletic training. Nothing wrong with that; in fact, a certain asceticism is a positive aid to the spiritual life

because it helps us to gain self-control. But carried to an extreme, as it is when there material things are shunned or devalued in the pursuit for some purer spirituality, it is destructive.

The pastoral leader who wrote this epistle argues against this extreme ascetic approach. He says, *“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still were governed by worldly standards? Why do you submit to regulations, “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch. . . these have an appearance of wisdom in promoting humility and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.”*

In other words, denying oneself the proper and appropriate use of material things, harsh and prolonged fasting, flagellating oneself or denigrating all sexuality as evil, is totally wrong-headed. It’s not material things or bodily desires that are bad; it’s our use or abuse of them where the question of good or evil arises.

If God is the creator of the material world, it cannot be bad. In the creation story of Genesis, we hear the storyteller affirm repeatedly, *“And God looked at everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”* Every time we come to the Lord’s Table, we testify to the goodness of the material world. Here, in the material elements of bread and wine, we remember and proclaim that God has blessed and sanctified matter. These elements signify for us the very real life and death of a real person Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, we confess, God entered fully into our fleshly, material human life. The fancy theological name for this is the Incarnation. *“The Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we saw his glory,”* is the way St. John puts it.

Our misuse and abuse of things is the result of inner attitudes, that our epistle writer says we must strip off as we would strip off dirty clothes. *“These are the ways you once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things as vengefulness, rage, malice, slander, abusive language, lying. Clothe yourselves with the new self that is being renewed*

*in the image of its creator. . . Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love.”*

You see, our relationship to things is bound up with our relationships to other people. When we are rightly related to others, by living lives of truthfulness, compassion, humility and love, then we will not abuse material things, and in the process abuse other people with whom we share those things in common. Rather, our relationship to material things, to other people, and to ourselves are gathered up into a new social wholeness, a new community, a new creation of *shalom*, where there are no stratifications based on ethnicity or social status or wealth, but where, as our writer puts it, “Christ is all, and in all.”

That new creation where harmony in all our relationships social and material prevails is the truth to which we the Church are called to bear witness in our life together. If we can get *things* right, if our relationship to things and to others is transformed in Christ, then in that transformation the world may catch a glimpse of its own future and the possibility of its own transformation.