

Pentecost 8 / July 31, 2022

Luke 12:13-21

“Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be. So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Riches with God

Our gospel begins with a man telling Jesus to tell his brother, to divide an inheritance with him. Jesus didn't respond positively. He told him that He was not a judge or arbitrator in such matters. He continued, warning him and the crowd, to be on guard against covetousness, saying that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his or her possessions. It sounds like an odd demand to make on Jesus. He was a prophet and teacher. He was proclaiming the kingdom of God; teaching faith and the knowledge of God. He wasn't giving a seminar on estate planning and the disbursement of inheritances. It sounds odd, but as experts in the law, teachers like Jesus were often called upon to help with legal disputes, including the settlement of inheritances. But Jesus would have nothing to do with it. He said, tersely, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”

Why so blunt? Perhaps it had something to do with the man's approach, telling him to do something, rather than asking. He was pretty blunt himself, demanding, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus didn't respond positively to demands. In our gospel a few weeks ago, Martha demanded that Jesus make her sister come and help her serve. Jesus refused, saying Mary had chosen best by listening to His teaching. His own mother approached Him at a wedding banquet and told Him, “They have no wine.” He said “Woman, what does that have to do with me.” Perhaps it sounded too much like a demand rather than a request. There is a big difference between asking someone to do something for us and telling them to do it, especially God!

Teachers like Jesus were often involved in settling disputes between people, often related to worldly wealth. But Jesus was not interested in worldly wealth, beyond its God given role in making provisions for daily living. Life is the gift of God, given by His word and mediated through daily bread, often secured through money. Jesus wasn't speaking against worldly wealth, but He warned against giving it too much value and allowing it to replace God in the shrine of the human heart. Our lives do not consist in our possessions, be they great or small. Our lives are a gift of God, given and preserved by His good grace. The psalmist sang, “The eyes of all look to you and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” Everything we possess is given by God on loan, to be returned when the span of our lives come to an end. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all else will be added to you.” True riches are the love and kindness of God, given by grace and received freely through faith in Jesus.

On the surface there was nothing wrong with the request the man in our gospel made of Jesus. But he asked the wrong person at the wrong time and not in the best way. Jesus was not an arbitrator of worldly disputes. He had come to proclaim the kingdom of God. His righteous reign in the world, beginning in the human heart through faith in Him as Saviour. Other people could settle accounts and resolve legal disputes between people. He came to settle accounts between God and humanity. He came to reconcile human beings to God in the heart of our inner being. He settled accounts and reconciled us to His heavenly Father through the blood of His cross.

We don't know whether the man who initiated Jesus' teaching had a case against his brother or not. It's beside the point. The point is that he clearly missed the point of Jesus' teaching, which was not the promotion of earthly government or the amassing of worldly wealth, but the establishing of God's kingdom in the human soul through faith in Him and the riches of faith and forgiveness received in Him. It's easy for us to miss the point and overvalue the things of the world and undervalue the things of the Spirit.

Before this encounter, Jesus had been speaking about the kingdom of God. He warned of the judgement to come saying, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed... Whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light.” He told the crowd not to be afraid of those who can kill the body, for they cannot harm the soul. He told them not to be afraid, but if they were going to be motivated by fear they should fear God. He has power to kill both soul and body in hell.

Most importantly God is the giver of life. He told them not to be afraid, because God loved them and they were precious in His sight. God cares even for sparrows, which are sold five for two pennies. He said, "Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." We are precious in God's sight! Then this man stood up. His question reveals what he considered important and of greatest value. He had heard enough spiritual stuff. He had a practical question. He wanted Jesus to address something really important, his inheritance.

If there is one thing people consider important, its inheritances. If there is anything people are willing to fight about, its their inheritance. Families are torn apart by inheritances. People are willing to be permanently estranged from their closest family members, for the sake of their rightful inheritance. But inheritances only benefit a person in time and for a time. In time inheritances are either spent, or passed on to someone else. No one takes their inheritance with them. All inheritances are received, because someone else was forced to give up her or his possessions by death. The only wealth we can take with us are the riches of God's love in Christ Jesus. The only inheritance that is for time and eternity is the inheritance of eternal life, earned by Jesus' death and guaranteed by His resurrection. This inheritance is offered for all to receive. This inheritance is given as a free gift to all who believe God and treasure Jesus in their hearts as Saviour and Lord.

To make His point, Jesus told a parable about a man who left lots of stuff, for others to inherit. He had lots of things that had practical value. He possessed absolutely nothing of eternal value. Jesus didn't call many people fools, but He called the man in this parable a fool. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns against calling our sisters and brothers fools, but He called this man a fool. He said, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" He concludes saying, "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." The man may have thought he was addressing a practical matter, but there is nothing more practical, valuable or more important than our soul's relationship with God. There is nothing more important than knowing God as our Father through faith in Jesus as our Saviour. There is nothing more valuable than faith in Jesus. There is no treasure greater than the riches of His grace and mercy. There is nothing more important than receiving Him as Saviour and knowing Him as Lord. In Him are the riches of God's love in forgiveness and the wealth of eternal life.

The man in the parable, the man who asked Jesus to divide the inheritance with his brother and everyone who thinks the things of this world are more practical and valuable than the things of God, are fools. The essence of foolishness in the bible is to worship the creature rather than the Creator. The essence of foolishness is to put our ultimate trust in things that pass out of our hands in death. Wisdom is to worship the Lord and treasure Him in our hearts as our God and Saviour. When the psalmist sang, "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God,'" he wasn't speaking about intellectual or philosophical atheism. He was speaking to the human sin of making gods out of things created by God. We are all vulnerable to this sin.

Jesus warns against covetousness, the sin of making things into God. If we value anything in the world above God, we are making fools of ourselves. We are fooling ourselves, because there is only God. All things exist in God, "in Him we live and move and have our being." All things exist because of God, "Every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God." There is nothing more important than knowing God and being enriched by His grace, which we receive as a free gift for the sake of Jesus. There is no treasure more valuable than the treasure of faith, forgiveness and life, which we receive from God for the sake of Jesus Christ. There is no inheritance more precious or enduring than the inheritance of eternal life that is ours in Christ. Which we receive in part now through faith, which we will receive in its fulness when He returns and makes us and all things new. God bless us to treasure in our hearts above all things, Christ our Saviour. In Him is the wealth of God's love, the riches of forgiveness and the treasure of eternal life. In His name. Amen