

+

Treasures on Earth and in Heaven

Sermon, Pentecost 10, Proper 13-C, August 1, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9,43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Today Paul tells us to put to death earthly things. This is pretty strong language. In the Gospel, Jesus also tells us basically, “You can’t take it with you.” Both of them are urging us to look to heaven for our reward and to leave material things behind.

The Gnostics expanded this theme to the point that they considered all material things, everything manifested in physical reality, to be inherently evil. Thus they denied the physical reality of Jesus. How could God be part of the physical world, which is inherently evil? This attachment of the material world to evil has caused enormous distress in this world. I believe that it is the root of the Roman Catholic Church’s inability to deal with human sexuality in a healthy way. But that is a complicated topic and not the subject of this sermon.

God, the Father, Creator God, has surrounded us with beauty. In the first Chapter of Genesis, after God has finished the creation of the world, we are told, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”¹ The writing of the contemplative fathers of the church in the *Philokalia* says, “If instead of stopping short at the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses, you seek with your intellect to contemplate their inner essences, seeing them as images of spiritual realities or as the inward principles of sensible objects, you will be taught that nothing belonging to the visible world is unclean. For by nature all things were created good.”² We have only to look, really look. Look closely at a flower and see how beautifully it is made. Look at the sky, see the power in a summer thunderstorm and the ephemeral beauty of dawn and sunset.

It is by immersing ourselves in this wonder that we can learn to appreciate these things for themselves. These are not *my* flowers growing in this garden beside my house, but rather, they are themselves, growing in joy for their Creator, and I only have stewardship over them for a time.

I think this is the heart of Jesus’ story. God created the world around us, and we may enjoy it, but not possess it. The key is in our attachments. Jesus warns us against greed. Paul equates greed with idolatry. Idolatry is when anything becomes more important to us than God. Greed, the desire to amass possessions, is one of the seven deadly sins. And it is not only material possessions that we can fall into worshipping, it may be power, or control, or anything else to which we give undue importance.

Our whole culture has become very materially oriented. Our society is building bigger and bigger houses. There is a thriving business in storage lockers, where people put their excess possessions, when they have more stuff than they can use. It seems to me that building a bigger barn is the Biblical equivalent of renting a storage locker.

¹ Genesis 1:31

² *Philokalia*, Vol. 2, 92, p. 185 (The Palmer, Sherrard, Ware edition)

+

We all need to periodically examine our relationship with our belongings: with our land, our home, and the contents of our home. These things are given to us to enjoy, not to possess; to nurture, not to hold. Most of us have too much stuff – I certainly do. We need to release this burden, to lighten the load, to share.

There is a tradition in Native American culture called a give-away. Many times the most valuable things are saved to give away. Storing or hoarding things is not understood. There is a high value placed on giving away and sharing. Once something is given away, all strings to that gift are broken. The gift is given with no expectations. Native people believe that what is given always comes back to the giver in another form of good. Native people also believe that bad (intentions, actions, etc.) results in bad returning to the doer. It is always the giver who receives the greatest blessing.

How do you think about your stuff? Is it important to you to have it? Do you have things that you haven't used, needed, or even looked at for years? There is a problem with this. These abandoned accumulations become magnets, not only for dust and dirt, but also they hold the energy of unresolved issues, and become little cesspits of negative energy. Have you often noticed how very difficult it is to clean out the back of a closet, or the attic, or the garage? It is not only the physical work in an ill-lit and cramped space, but it is all the negative energy that is attached to these items. Your home will feel fresher, cleaner, and lighter when these accumulations have been removed.

I moved nine times in eight years, so have little excess stuff. But now that I am settled, I will have to guard against these areas of abandoned projects and enthusiasms. Clothes that I can't wear until I loose some weight, supplies for crafts that no longer interest me, etc. I went through my books this spring and it has been gratifying to see how the pile in Welliver Hall has diminished as the books I no longer wanted or needed have found new homes.

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."³

So how do we store up our treasures in heaven? What are they anyway? The first thing is to cultivate a God-oriented life. Cultivate an attitude of gratitude for all the blessings in your life. Ask yourself sometimes, "What would Jesus do?" Although WWJD has become a buzzword among the Evangelicals, there is some good sense there. If we truly ask that question seriously, it requires you to examine your values, and more importantly, to be open to the Holy Spirit. Appreciate the beauty around you, be thankful, and deal with situations in your life with gentleness, patience and compassion. These are the treasures of heaven: peace of mind, cleanliness in body, mind, and spirit, humility, and most importantly, constantly striving to be the person that Jesus showed us how to be.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.⁴

³ Matthew 6:19-21

⁴ Ephesians 3:20-21