

August 5, 2007
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Who is the rich fool?”

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, '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."

Colossians 3:1-11

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Sermon

We use the term “Gospel” a lot. For those of you who don’t know, it means “good tidings” or “good news.” I just read today’s Gospel lesson a few minutes ago. Did any of you catch the irony? Remembering that “Gospel” means “good news,” listen to the end of the reading and the following liturgy.

“But God said to him, “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.’ This is the Gospel of the Lord”

This is the Gospel of the Lord? Does this really sound like good news to us? Here we sit in one of the wealthiest countries in the world where the square footage of the average house is steeply on the rise. When searching to buy a home, what is one of our biggest considerations? Closet space. There is a huge industry based on providing space to put the stuff we don’t use. We have gobs and gobs of things we’ve inherited or purchased with the money we earn. All this stuff is considered to be “the fruit of our labor.”

We hear Jesus telling this parable and it probably doesn’t make us too comfortable. There’s no good news to be had. There’s only two characters in the story: God and a man. Really, who are we going to identify with? Naturally we identify with the rich guy. There is nobody else there! And frankly speaking, it’s not too hard for us to do, is it? We hear about storing up things in barns, and some of us don’t have to look any farther than our own garage or storage shed or even our pantry to feel guilty. They’re packed to overflowing with stuff nobody is using, but it’s ours. Many may hear this story and look to investments, bank accounts and 401Ks and say to themselves, “Is this *my* barn? Am I this man, hoarding up riches and telling myself that this is what makes me secure?”

If we simply leave this parable standing alone with little examination, it crushes us. There is no Gospel. There is no good news. We’re left with the comparison between us and this man, this rich fool,

and we see a whole lot of commonality. We look at his fate and a knot forms in our stomachs and tension crawls up our spines as we wonder about our own fate.

To find the Gospel, the good news, we have to look at what's not in the story.

Regarding the rich man, "*he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*"

Who is this rich fool talking to? Is he talking to God? Hardly. I see this guy standing and looking at a mirror and having this conversation. Yahweh, the true God, never even comes on this guy's radar. If this guy has a god, it's the reflection he sees before him. Its temples are the barns he builds filled with grain. He talks to his own soul as if the soul depends on him for comfort and safekeeping. He says the soul can relax and take it easy because of the worldly goods that have been stored up.

What does this rich fool think of his fellowman? He doesn't. The idea that any of the excess crops might be used to feed the poor and hungry doesn't even occur to him. His world centers on himself. He's got his and whatever more there is, well, he wants that to be his too. His neighbors can starve for all he cares. He's secure the he'll never go hungry and that's all that matters.

That's what's not in the story; a love for God and neighbor.

Can it be said of us that we are not rich toward God? Are we this man? Yes...at least we were. We were indeed this selfish, greedy man who had no use for God. But he's been killed. That sinful man was united to Christ in Christ's death on the cross. That man who never would have thought of looking to Yahweh as his Lord and master was taken to the tomb with Christ. That man who never could conceive of serving God through service to his neighbor was brought to nothing by Jesus' death. Christ died so that man in us, the man that God condemns as "fool," would die through him, that all the punishment and wrath the fool deserves would be borne by Christ, God's own son.

But Christ rose on Easter Sunday, and while that old man was left behind in the tomb, we as a new creation rose with Him to life. Through Holy Baptism we were made this new creation. We were gifted with faith that looks beyond ourself to our God and Savior as the source of all comfort, the source of salvation, the place where our soul can safely rest. Paul writes in Romans, "*We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*"

Thanks to Christ, we walk in a newness of life, a forgiven state where God looks down at us and doesn't see the self-absorbed fool who makes himself a god. God sees us wearing the holiness and righteousness of Christ like a robe. We've been gifted with a faith that wraps us in Christ, allowing us to rise with Him to new life both here on earth and on the other side of this life.

We were that old man, but we are no longer. That's what our baptism means. That's what our faith means. But then, why does it bug us so much when we hear this parable? Because that man doesn't want to stay dead. Both Jesus in our Gospel lesson and Paul in our Epistle lesson give warning to be on guard against the desires of the old man. And we don't always do the best job of it. That's why it bugs us so. Although we live as a new creation as Christians in Christ's kingdom on earth, we're not yet in the heavenly kingdom to come. Shadows of that old man are constantly on us, tempting us, trying to trip us up. We look at our lives and we see our failures and sometimes those shadows seem to be the truth about us and our lives in Christ as the thing in us that is false. And that's just what Satan, that old man's master, would have you believe.

Don't fall for it. You're baptism isn't a one-time event that's spoiled when you slip into sin. We run back to it for forgiveness again and again. Luther writes the truth in the Small Catechism when he talks about what baptism means for our daily living. "It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever." Christ's resurrection means we are able to daily

say we're sorry, daily be forgiven, daily leave that old self in the grave and begin our life anew as a pure and forgiven person in God's sight.

So when we hear this parable with no Gospel, where do we take comfort? We're not this man! We're not this rich fool who puts his trust in himself and bases his life on the richness of his possessions. That's the good news! That's the Gospel.

How do we know this? Look where you are. The old man doesn't get up on Sunday to praise God. The old man doesn't long to hear God's Word preached. The old man doesn't go to God in prayer to ask for and receive forgiveness and an abundance of other gifts. The old man doesn't come to the altar seeking the body and blood of Christ Jesus for spiritual nourishment, sustenance and forgiveness. That old man would never even consider giving of his wealth or time to God's church or to any of the charitable institutions in the community. The old man stands boldly before his mirror putting faith in possessions. His life consists of and depends on that which doesn't last. You are not him. You are baptized Christians. That old man was washed from you, and you rose from that water a new creation.

Be the person you are. Be the man or woman God has made you. You have been washed and raised to new life with Christ. *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."* That's where we need to see ourselves, with Christ at the right hand of God. *"You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."* Our life isn't the sum of our possessions and it isn't the sum of our failures. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. That is the eternal reality. We strive to live this reality out the best we can in this life. The Gospel message, the good tidings, the fantastic news is that Christ made this our reality, not us. When we fail, the reality that Christ died for our sins does not change. It remains truth. Christ remains the unblemished sacrifice who paid for all our sin. The Gospel is that through God's love and mercy, we aren't the rich fool in the parable. We've been made one with the man who rose from the grave on Easter morning. That is our certainty. That is our good news. We abide in Him in this earthly reality and we know this stretches beyond the grave to the next reality just as we sang a moment ago: "When He shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in Him be found. Clothed in His righteousness alone, redeemed to stand before His throne."

This, is the Gospel of the Lord.