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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)
July 31, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

So, why is this brother asking Jesus to get into the middle of an inheritance dispute? We are to presume that he is the younger brother, because, according to the Law of Moses that prevailed at this time, an older brother would automatically receive double the share of an inheritance when estates were settled following the death of a parent. Here, Jesus is expected to remedy this apparent injustice by declaring that the inheritance shall be divided equally.

The younger brother probably wasn't expecting the response he got from Jesus. In return, Jesus asks him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:14). If you're familiar with Family Systems Theory, which I spoke about briefly two Sundays ago, you'd recognize Jesus doing something that a "well-differentiated" person does. He doesn't take the bait to become enmeshed in someone's drama, nor does he attempt to "fix" the situation. Often, in these circumstances, doing that would make matters worse and increase everyone's anxiety. But Jesus doesn't lob a softball back at the younger brother, either. On the contrary, he tears right into him with a stern warning; he says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). That certainly couldn't have been the kind of response the younger brother expected!

I believe he was looking for someone to back him up...

The way Jesus frames the matter takes the inheritance itself completely out of

the picture. Jesus cuts straight to the heart of it all; the younger brother is greedy. By making this diagnosis, Jesus is then able to share another of his well-known parables and hopefully awaken him to his error.

So why is greed bad? That might have something to do with the way it can distort or destroy your relationships with everything and everyone, because eventually all that will matter is getting more. More money, more stuff, more fame, more thrills. It consumes people to the point that nothing and no one else deserves anything except you.

In our culture, unfortunately, we overlook the fact that those we regard as "successful" may have been greedy. Several years ago, I was listening to a program on public radio that examined the flip side of success. The host began the program by challenging the notion that the lives of highly successful people were as perfect as they seemed. Sure, all the "success metrics" were there -- great job, lots of money, beautiful home (or homes), fabulous vacations, good physical health. Naturally, the program's host had to be a bit of a cynic like me because he thought that everything can't be quite as perfect as it looks.

Not surprisingly, a little digging discovered that all the "success" somehow managed to hide a lot of bad marriages, family dysfunction, and general unhappiness, so, yes, everything wasn't quite as perfect as it seemed. Then, a contrast was made with people researched for the program who didn't have quite as many of the outward trappings of success, but these "less successful" people turned out, by and large, to be better spouses, better parents, and happier people in general. Thus, by popular metrics of success, the most successful people may not always be the best human beings. One might say,

"That's hardly a revolutionary finding," but it's a good point nonetheless.

It's a good point because we can "succeed" at a number of things, but we still need to ask ourselves if we're succeeding as a human being. Why does Jesus warn the younger brother about greed in this morning's Gospel? I think it's because he sees something in him -- like pettiness and selfishness -- that will prevent him from becoming the decent human being that God wants him to be. At this point, it's time for him to grow up and get over it! Besides, it's an inheritance, which no one really "deserves," anyway...

At some point, too, all of us need to figure out what's worth the effort and what isn't. If it's honest work for honest pay, it's usually okay, but if it's a petty argument over some nickels and dimes, it's usually not okay. But the lure of a dollar can still get us!

I was probably thirteen or fourteen and waiting in the lunch line at school when I saw the lunch lady hand out envelopes to a couple of kids in line ahead of me. I asked the lunch lady about this, and she explained that they were getting paid for working a fundraising dinner at the school. (Mind you, this was a Lutheran school -- private and, at the time, always strapped for cash.) At that point, I wanted to know when the next dinner was so that, afterwards, I could get one of those envelopes, too! I remember working several of those dinners -- waiting tables, busing dishes, and the like -- which got me into something I've done off and on ever since. Just before I started here in 2019, as a matter of fact, I was a part-time bartender and waiter at a little hole-in-the-wall establishment in Crystal, North Dakota.

And, if you want my opinion, I think it's very hard work and, knowing that, I

tip my servers generously when dining in restaurants. And I know I couldn't do that kind of work full-time, because it would burn me out!

But I'll never forget wanting what the kids in the lunch line ahead of me got in those envelopes.

Money.

So greed may have, indeed, been a motivation for me to get one of those envelopes, too, but I suppose you could say that at least I had to work for it...

Wanting something for nothing or feeling entitled to it is much more problematic, though. Why does the younger brother want a bigger share of the inheritance? I don't think he wants it so he can help more people; he just wants it for the sake of having it. But the Law, as it was at the time, wouldn't allow the inheritance to be divided equally. I think that, even though this isn't stated explicitly in our text, Jesus would've told the younger brother, "Kid, live with it and move on!"

But then we get to Jesus' parable, which seems to attack complacency more so than greed. Here, the rich man says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19). This man already had everything he wanted and the only thing beyond that he could want would be to live comfortably on Easy Street. He probably wouldn't help many people, but he probably wouldn't hurt anybody, either. A greedy person would actually be more dangerous, I'd think, because they lack the empathy to see how their greed hurts others. Someone who is complacent, like the rich man in our parable, probably wouldn't have the ambition to actively hurt someone, and damage done by him wouldn't be as noticeable or would take longer to appear.

Jesus reminds us, though, that inaction can be just as bad as action. God says to the rich man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20). But whether the issue is greed or complacency, the underlying problem is still the same. It's the human ego that makes us do things for ourselves and not for others. "I want this" or "I want to do this" is not the same as (and is entirely incompatible with) "God is calling us to do this." But in Christ, we are freed to do what God calls us to do, and, when we think about it, a life of greed or complacency can be a terribly lonely and miserable life to live. On the other hand, a life lived for and with other people can be endlessly fulfilling.

In order to see what makes us tick, we need to be extremely honest about our motivations and ask ourselves, "Is this really what God wants me to do, or is this what I want to do?" And that kind of discernment is not always easy, because we're generally decent people and, yes, our ego can contribute to a lot of good and worthy things. But, then, what is God contributing? And are we listening to what God is contributing? One thing we learn by reading the remainder of the New Testament is that we don't have to be the greedy and complacent people that we used to be. We don't need to be held captive to our ego and do only the things we want to do. We have, as our Second Reading states, "stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed [ourselves] with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:9b-10). God has granted this to us through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom and in whom sin and death were defeated, opening for us the way of righteousness and eternal life.

What a way to live! No longer like the petty younger brother looking for a bigger share of the inheritance. No longer like the rich man living idly in what could easily become a very dull existence. Yes, we are free to listen with ears wide open for God's call and never have to wonder, "What's in it for us?" For us, Christ died,..Christ died so that we may live for others.

Amen.