



SUNDAY SERMON

Rich Toward God

One of St. Columba's distinguishing characteristics is that we are a truly multi-generational congregation for whom faith is a lively work in progress at every stage of life. People of all ages have something precious to learn, celebrate and contribute as we practice what it means to be Christ's body in the world.

This morning we greet the news of the world with deep sadness, as two more savage, senseless mass shootings leave us shaken, angry and fearful for our country. As we pray for all those affected by these tragedies, let us rededicate ourselves as an intergenerational community to continue advocating for public policies that reduce the threat of gun violence.

One ministry that enriches our community is called Journey to Adulthood, which offers students in the early years of high school the chance to learn about the life and teachings of Jesus while they're beginning to anticipate the responsibilities of adulthood. Their studies culminate in a pilgrimage trip to Oregon on which we'll be sending them forth today. Our J2A members have learned together in Sunday school and confirmation classes. On pilgrimage they'll experience God in new ways that will begin to form their identities as mature people of faith.

But while we give thanks for the J2A group and the promise of new beginnings in God for all of us, the voices we hear in scripture today are focused not on the journey to adulthood but the journey of adulthood. On the journey to adulthood we begin to be aware of what legacy our families and teachers might be passing along to inspire or caution us for the road ahead. On the journey of adulthood we think more about what our priorities are, what our legacy might be, and how we face the prospect of mortality.

Each scripture reading today draws us back to these questions. In Luke's gospel we meet a rich landowner whose robust harvests and wealth give his life meaning. He seems to think this legacy is all for him, and that he can stave off mortality by enjoying what he has accumulated. The Teacher in the reading from Ecclesiastes bitterly complains that his hard-won legacy will be passed on to people who are less wise and diligent than he has been. He's convinced that his life has been pointless and that his work adds up to nothing.

The speaker in today's psalm has a message for both the rich man and the wise Teacher: neither wealth nor wisdom confers special status with God. Mortality is the great equalizer, with death being the only condition all of God's people have in common.

continued

DATE

Pentecost 8
Sunday, August 4, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

Luke 12: 13-21
Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14,
2: 18-23

These themes seem more suited to Lent than to a summer Sunday. After all, we are a congregation on a renewed mission to Live God's Love—to look not backward but ahead. Yet mortality and questions about the meaning of life are always at the edge of our hearts, ready to give us pause, especially as we experience periods of transition and loss.

I'm in the midst of such a time now, tending to the task of cleaning out and preparing to sell the house where three generations of my family lived until the deaths of my brother and mother in the past two years. I'm the final steward of the family story. I have no children and no siblings, and so the name, the memories and the earthly meaning of our life together ends with me. That makes it hard to let go of tangible reminders of what brought joy and purpose to our family.

With each piece of furniture that goes out the door, the loss seems more real, my own mortality looms larger, and I question, like the speaker in Ecclesiastes, whether any legacy of my life will endure when I'm gone. A real estate agent, sensing my difficulty in letting go of things, offered a ready solution: "David, just rent a storage unit and you can store all the things you're not ready to part with." I don't intend to follow that advice, but I know that stowing things away is a growing practice in our culture, as we can see from the proliferation of self-storage facilities.

The rich man in today's gospel story would thrive in 21st century America, where we can boast of having the highest per-capita amount of storage space of any nation on earth. Much of the demand is driven by relatively privileged baby-boomers like me who see the wisdom of downsizing but have stuff we don't want to let go of. We may not be as greedy or self-absorbed as the man in the story, but we store things up, perhaps hoping they will make life more meaningful and be our legacy, while postponing thoughts of mortality.

The rich man looks forward to years of comfort. But God has a jolting message for him: "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (12: 20). The rich fool is confronted with the truth that his life belongs to God, not to himself, and that in God's economy, he is destitute.

I wonder if he had studied Ecclesiastes. That writer would have scoffed at his plan to build bigger barns in order to feel secure. For the author of Ecclesiastes, there is no such thing as security and no sense of accomplishment from which people can derive comfort. Every human action and achievement, he says, is "vanity and a chasing after wind" (Eccl. 2: 14). A better translation of the Hebrew word rendered here as "vanity" would be "vapor"—all things are vaporous, transient, fleeting. Our learning and labor are wasted and God is merely toying with us, keeping humans busy with work that yields only stress and insomnia.

Ecclesiastes in Greek means "Teacher" and probably refers to an elder sage addressing an assembly of students, perhaps a group similar in some ways to our J2A class. I doubt if we would hire this Teacher to be our Director of Youth Ministries. He offers a bleak and some might say cynical view of life where God seems detached. Ecclesiastes poses such a stark challenge to traditional teaching it almost did not make it into the Bible. Some rabbis were leery of circulating this dark view of the faith.

At times, the pain, injustice and arbitrariness of life give us good cause to wonder why God has put us here and whether anything we do really matters. I'm grateful that the candid voice of Ecclesiastes was kept alive to remain part of our conversation about faith.

But it's only a part. This pessimistic Teacher and the foolish rich man have one tragic thing in common—they are trying to make sense of the world alone. They try to measure satisfaction as solitary actors when God designed human life to be relational. The rich man can only express himself in first-person pronouns: "I have no place to store my crops...I will tear down my barns and build larger ones... I will store my grain and my goods...I will say to my soul...'relax, eat, drink, be merry'.... " (Luke 12: 18-19).

I wonder how merry he can really be. He thinks he has worked alone and succeeded alone and now has only himself to talk to. He has forgotten that the abundant crops come from God, that other people have contributed to his fortune and now depend on the food he stores away. Jesus makes an example of him because he represents a mindset and a system that is incompatible with the Kingdom of God. The man is condemned for forgetting that he lives not in a world of his own making, but in a world in which all things come from and return to God.

The Teacher in Ecclesiastes likewise seems to have forgotten the bedrock Jewish teaching that the goal of God's creation is to bring about shalom or community harmony and wholeness. The harmony of shalom entails elevating the needs of others over the wants of self. But this Teacher doesn't recognize that the blessings, contributions and challenges of his life are woven together with those of others and do constitute a valuable legacy.

Jesus teaches that the lesson of the parable is for us to be "rich toward God" (12: 21), and I expect he would apply this not only to the misguided rich man but also to the woeful Teacher, to me as I fret about legacy and mortality, to our J2A youth as they discern what place faith will occupy in their lives, and to all of you. To be rich toward God involves not only being generous and compassionate, but something more fundamental—having an outlook on the world, an orientation of living that keeps our energies and priorities in steady alignment with God's.

We need to grow comfortable with the paradox that God cherishes us in our uniqueness and loves us for who we are, yet calls us to be ready to set our selfhood aside, to make room to for others' love, wisdom, strength and even pain. This means resisting the impulse to assign permanent significance to impermanent things. A house like mine can contain things that temporarily belonged to one family. Perhaps being rich toward God involves the recognition that while things cannot endure, relationships that bear the imprint of God's love do endure. Values and character traits that reveal the image of God are my family's enduring legacy to me and can be part of my legacy as well.

In last Sunday's gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray the one essential prayer that expresses the yearnings and commitment of those who would follow him. I've known the Lord's Prayer by heart since youth, but over a lifetime I've learned, unlearned, and keep relearning one challenging yet liberating truth: nowhere in the prayer do the words "I" or "my" appear. The prayer is about us and our interdependent vision of God's kingdom.

Making God's realm a reality on earth is a group project, and whether we are on the journey to adulthood or the journey of adulthood, to live in faithful service to that vision is to be rich toward God indeed.

Amen.