

Trading Greed for Riches

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In Luke, this morning, we hear another parable from Jesus. This parable is prompted by a gentleman in the crowd who speaks up saying, "Lord, tell my brother to give me my share of the inheritance."

Ok... I guess this is somewhat of a reasonable request. I mean, you have this holy man who's also considered a rabbi; a teacher. And it is a matter of law that any inheritance be split up properly between heirs. When you have a society built on law, the teachers generally look to that law. In this case they look to the Word of God since God was believed to have given the law. In other words, what does God say about it?

So again I say, It's kind of a reasonable request. As can be expected though, Jesus looks beyond the surface issue, challenging the status quo. He responds with a rather unexpected retort.

"Who appointed me judge?" he asks. "Who appointed me arbitrator of petty squabbles? That's not why I'm here." Though if we're talking about Jesus eschatologically; in terms of end-times, then God appointed Jesus judge. In this moment however, Jesus is saying, "You're focusing on the wrong thing."

Jesus has been teaching this crowd through multiple chapters of Luke at this point, trying to get them to understand a simple truth about his presence with them. Jesus has come to teach life. Jesus has come to teach how to be in relationship with God.

This gentleman from the crowd is worried about his inheritance. It's indicative of many of the people in that time and still today. They are worried about material things. Jesus is saying, "Let's look beyond the material to what's really important."

This is when Jesus begins to tell a parable about a rich man, who one season was blessed with an abundance of crops. His farm, his household, his business just exploded with the harvest. He reaped so much his barns couldn't hold all that was harvested. So the man thinks to himself, "What am I going to do? My barns are bursting at the seams... I know, I'll build more barns. Better yet, I'll tear down my barns and I'll build bigger barns. The new barns will hold all my harvest and I'll have everything I need for years to come."

Now, on the first reading, thinking about this as a businessman... I am not a businessman by the way. But thinking about this as I would perceive a businessman to think on it, this man's plan makes sense. He has all this grain and no place to store it, so yeah, you need a place to put it. Build a bigger barn.

Think of this in terms of present day practice. You go to any local stores and you know they have someplace to store their inventory, either on-site or off-site or both, before they're able to display the merchandise on their shelves. In either case they need to make sure they have enough room for the incoming inventory.

I worked for a company call Americold for about three years before coming to Oregon. Americold is a company specializing in the storage and transport of frozen foods. The location I worked at was a massive warehouse, easily capable of fitting multiple football fields inside the freezer. This freezer had 26 aisles, one for each letter of the alphabet, lined with steel framed racks, stacked four tiers high, of various depths in which to store food one to four pallets deep.

Unfortunately, during my time with Americold, we would have to deal with a repeating problem. This massive warehouse wasn't big enough to store everything we were contracted to store. Then Americold took on a new customer at this location and had to rearrange everything to somehow make it work. That would have been a great time to have "bigger barns."

Instead, what management decided to do was, cram as much into the warehouse as they could. This included blocking off an access tunnel through the center of the warehouse, which wasn't suppose to happen. It involved stacking pallets against open wall-space, which wasn't suppose to happen. It involved quickly doubling the workforce, which was great, except for now there were inexperienced forklift drivers causing congestion.

Overall, the "savvy" business decisions made by management to secure the most business with the least amount of cost created congestion, delay, prolonged employee exposure to extreme cold, and damaged product. All of this comes back on the worker whose job it is to fill the orders as fast as they can with the least amount of damage while staying within a certain rate of production. Speaking form experience, that's not an easy task.

The point I'm getting to here is this. More and better in business ventures are not always better for people. Heck, it's not always better for the business even. We're left to wonder what was the motivation of the company? Was the motivation to provide outstanding customer service and accommodate the client? Or was the motivation simply, make more money... and who cares about the employees?

I considered that in my position there a few times, because there were a few times when I came very close to having my employment placed on the chopping block. Though I was working as fast as I could, with all the difficulties I just described, I wasn't making the rate management perceived I should have been able to make. Money talks and people walk.

Coming back to the gospel lesson, when the rich land owner in the parable is saying, "I need build bigger barns. I need to store all my harvest crop and save it up," it's a moment of money talking. The land owner is listening not to Spirit, or God, or heart in that moment. His listening to the prospect of material wealth. He's listening to things, possessions, coin.

Is this really what it is to be human? To allow things and the promise of more things to rule over your life? Or is there something more to life?

Jesus says, "I did not come to be your judge or your arbitrator." Jesus came to teach us life and truth. This man seeking his inheritance was coming to Jesus to have him settle a dispute dealing with neither of these. This man's request showed where many of the people's focus was. Not on God, but on worldly things, and on selfish desires.

It's the same problem that's been plaguing humanity since before the days of the prophet Hosea, whom we also read from this morning. When we listen to God's words as recorded by Hosea, we can hear there an anger, a hurt, even a sense of God feeling betrayed by the people God has loved for so long. We can possibly hear even more of God's pain when we remember Hosea is a prophet after Israel split into northern and southern kingdoms. So not only are God's children turning away from God, now they're fighting against each other. They're turning from the life God has been trying to give them.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel in its waywardness is constantly coming back to the question of who is God? Is it Yahweh, Jehovah, El Shaddai, El Adonai... all of those names we have for God? Or is it Baal? Well, God in this passage is feeling that hurt for the fact that Israel has pulled so far away they even have to ask the question.

Listen, and see if you can hear God's anguish in these words:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. (Hosea 11:1-2)

The more God calls us, how much more do we walk away? I mean I've experienced it in my own life where I hear the voice of God, in those ways God speaks to me. I am drawn and I feel that pull of Spirit on my heart...

"Come and talk to me, Tom. Come spend some time with me," God says.

And often times I'll respond with, "Yeah, I'd love to. Let's have some time together and have some great conversation. I'll see ya in the morning, Abba God." But often times morning comes, and what do I forget to do? I forget to pick up my Bible. I forget to have that conversation with the one being who can help me start my day right.

Instead I pick up my phone and ask, "What's going on today?" I turn on the TV and ask, "What can I find on Netflix?" Or I pick up a book other than the Bible and ask, "What's going on with Gandalf and the hobbits today?"

All the while, God is saying, "Come to me. Start your day with me. Let's have that conversation we were looking forward to and let's get your day going on the right foot."

Turning back to scripture, we can hear God reminiscing about all the things God did with and for Israel:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. (Hosea 11:3-4)

Then we hear the breaking of God's heart in a moment of anger:

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. (Hosea 11:5-7)

There's God's pain. There is God saying to the people, "You know what? I have poured my heart out to you. I have given you a holy code to live by. I have been working with you teaching you how to live and love. I've pulled you out of Egypt. I gave you a land flowing with milk and honey. I was with you against the Philistines. My presence with with you in the wilderness when you walked with Moses. I gave you water in that wilderness when there was none to be found, manna from heaven, even quail in the evening. I gave you the Judges when your enemies rose against you. I gave you David as your king, and I gave his son Solomon wisdom to do right by you and right by me. I have done all of this because of my love for you, and still you quarrel with one another and turn away from me."

Have you ever felt pain like that? The pain of a parent trying desperately to keep their children on the right path? Have you ever felt a sense of betrayal like that?

Let me give you a less dramatic example. Have you ever been slaving over a hot stove, working to prepare a wonderfully nutritious meal for your kids when they were still small. You are so proud of this meal. You know they're going to love it. You finally finish and call everyone to the table as you bring over this wonderful prize of a dinner. You dish out the food on to their plates and after giving thanks you tell them to dig in... only to hear them say, "I don't want this. This is gross. I don't like it." You might even respond with, "You liked it yesterday. You even licked your plate." And you are rebuffed with a simple, "Well I don't like it today."

Speaking from experience as a dad, there's some hurt that comes with hearing those words. There's frustration. There could even be a small sense of betrayal depending on how hard and how long you worked on that meal. You might try to think of ways to get them to eat what you know is good for them. How can you make it fun? How can you get them invested? What deal is it gonna take for them to eat the good food you've provided? You might even reach a point when you finally just snap and send them to their room without supper.

But you know that's not the last word. You know you're love and compassion for your

children isn't going to allow you to let them go hungry and before too long your heart carries you to their door with a plate of food as you tell them to come out and eat. Through that mercy and forgiveness your relationship, and maybe even your hurt pride, is healed from this small scrape of kids being kids.

It's that bit of parental mercy we hear in the last part of this morning's Hosea passage. It's God's heart unable to turn away from God's children:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord. (Hosea 11:9-11)

We have that hope and that compassion as parents, don't we. God has that same hope in us as God's children. As we are the God's people, the Church, Christ's bride, God has that same hope in us. It's the hope that God's love and a child-like faith in us will bring about healing and restored relationship.

The question is, what are we going to do with what God has done for us? In the parable Jesus told about the rich fool, the land owner is all about himself. His thinking is all "me" thinking. "I know what I'll do with *my* crops. I'll tear down *my* barns, and build *myself* bigger barns. Then I will store all of *my* harvest, all of *my* bounty, all of *my* goods in *my* barns. Then I will say to *my* soul, 'Soul, you've done good. You can sit back and enjoy life, and be happy and merry for the rest of your days; for years to come.'"

It's all about him. It's all about his happiness. It's all about his possessions. It's all about how he is going to live out the rest of his life. But when we're rich towards God, is it just us we're concerned with?

When we're rich towards God, it's not about just us. There are people who have next to nothing who are so much more wealthy than those who have everything. It's not because of what's in their bank account. It's because of what's in their heart. It's what's in our hearts that is of the utmost importance to God. What's in our hearts is what gets us through the ins and outs of our days. Money in the bank is functional, it's necessary. Possessions are good to have. They make life a little easier and perhaps a little more beautiful. But ultimately, what are they besides a way to not be bored, a pretty painting on your wall, or just a shortcut in getting some tasks done. These things only fill us up a little bit, and only temporarily.

We need to be after the heart of God, doing those things that feed our hearts and fill us up in more profound ways. We need to be about feeding the hungry, not hoarding the harvest in our barns. We need to be about clothing the naked, not fussing over brand names and our own image.

We need to be about giving drink to the thirsty, not minimizing the need for clean water throughout the world. We need to be about visiting and caring for the sick, not trying to turn a profit on prescriptions. We need to be about visiting those who are imprisoned, not hiding behind an air of superior righteousness. We need to be about bringing that word of God, not necessarily in preaching or even speaking, but in kindness and in love.

You know, it's been said, the best sermon you can give is not by words but how you live. The best gift from God you can give does not come from words. I could preach all day long. If I do that though, what really is that going to benefit us? We don't come in to church to be filled with words, words, and more words.

We come in to church to be nourished and filled and motivated. We come here to visit with God and be in conversation with God. We come here to be renewed and prepared for the work ahead. We come here to remember what richness we have in God, and then go out to be richer in God as we live in love with God. For to be rich toward God is to be in relationship with God.

Being in relationship with God and with Christ is to hear that voice speaking to us, and to *not* ask Jesus, "What about my inheritance? When am I gonna get mine?" It's *not* ask Jesus, like some of the disciples, "Can I sit at your right hand when you come into your kingdom?"

Being in relationship with God *is* to walk with Jesus and say, "Jesus, what good can I do in the world today?" It *is* asking, "Jesus, what stranger would you have me help today?" It *is* asking, "Jesus, how can I live the life you have called me to today?"

If the rich fool in the parable, instead of planning ways to store everything up for himself, would have seen his plentiful harvest and asked, "God, how will you have me use this blessing today? How will you use this abundance?" there would have been a much different hope spread through the community. It would have been better. It would have been God's child coming faithfully back to God.

As we go out, let us know faithfulness in God is action. It is love lived out. When we go out, let us know that true riches come from how we live our life on our daily walk with God. It's not how we spend our money or how we invest. True riches come from how we give out of what God has given us.

Let us always return to God. Let us always be faithful. Let us always be generous. Let us always be rich in spirit.

In Jesus' name, Amen.