

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1, 2010

Where's Your Security?

Luke 12:13-21

Maybe you remember the movie El Cid. It's a film about a Spanish knight who almost singlehandedly saved the country of Spain from the Muslim invaders. The story of this remarkable man is based on the truth. The movie told the truth about many of his victories. The movie told the truth when it recounted his death. The movie told the truth when it depicted his generals, desiring to stop the spreading panic, pretended that their leader was alive.

They dressed his corpse in armor, strapped him to his horse and tied a sword into his lifeless hand.

All of those things happened. The rest of the film unfortunately is fiction. The movie ended with the horse-carried body of El Cid routing the frightened Muslims. History says it didn't happen that way.

The corpse fooled nobody.

The Muslims didn't buy it.

The Spanish soldiers didn't follow after their dead leader.

And the attack failed. That's because the body of a dead man is a poor leader.

We believe that our Savior and Lord rose from the dead and yet we don't follow on many occasions. Is it because we don't believe that he rose from the dead and still leads us and calls us to follow him to life. This is based not on false securities but on him.

Why does Jesus answer questions about heaven and requests for teaching about prayer with stories about a wounded stranger and a hungry drop-in guest? Maybe because Jesus notices that a lot of our talk about things of God is a way of avoiding the personal presence of God in the hurt and hungry people we meet on the road to Jerusalem. Maybe because he knows that our fondness for discussion on matters of heaven and prayer is a diversion from having to deal personally with our family and friends in whom God is present? Maybe because Jesus is trying to wean us from chattering God-talk?

Here's another story that follows a similar pattern that we have seen in the last two weeks as Jesus moves the conversation from the supposedly "spiritual" to the apparently mundane. An unnamed person steps out of the crowd of thousands and addresses Jesus with this: "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me."

The man's request is not out of line. And coming so soon after the prayer and parable on prayer, this is even more odd. Here is a man doing exactly what Jesus asked him to do: "Ask, Seek, Knock." The man is praying, and praying just as Jesus taught him to pray. He even addresses Jesus using a verb in the imperative addressed personally to Jesus. But the consequence of his prayer is an abrupt dismissal...So much for the prayer formula. If prayer is a matter of getting the correct grammar addressed to the right person, this man certainly would have gotten his way.

But Jesus discerns that in the request there is not a passion for justice, which is a theme through all of scripture but a virus sin, the sin of greed, of covetousness. Was this man's request of Jesus in the matter of justice a smoke screen obscuring something a lot different? Jesus thought it was. His story blew the smoke away.

The story that Jesus told ignores the man's "rights" and skewers his greed. But the story does it by indirection. Will the man out of the crowd recognize himself in the story of the barn builder? If it does it will require the exercise of his imagination. For a parable is not an explanation. The parable is not an illustration. We cannot look at the parable as a spectator and expect to get it. A parable does not make things easier; it makes it harder by requiring participation, by entering the story, in this case by taking on the role of the barn builder.

The parable of the barn builder is an exposé of greed; using what we have to get more instead of giving away more, using our position of goods for getting rather than giving. There is no avoiding this condition of wealth, whether we conceive it as a blessing from God or the material results of a capitalist economy. And all the time the greed virus is in our bloodstream. Sometimes there are enough Scripture antibodies (commandments, proverbs, parables, sacrificial love of Jesus) to protect us against infection. But there are also other times when our defenses are lowered and our whole system is fatigued. We get the fever and runny nose of greed. It isn't long before we're thinking about building bigger barns.

We quit thinking of wealth as love to be shared and begin calculating it as power to be used. He doesn't need any help, his future is secure, and he certainly isn't thinking about others. Love God with everything you are, and love your neighbor as yourself. They are gone.

In his plans, however, the man ignores these fundamental precepts. He exhibits no sense of stewardship, nor awareness of reaching out to the people around him in any kind of sharing, that the

Torah demanded of all true Israelites. He thinks only of himself. In his brief statement, he uses the word "I" six times, "me" three times, and "myself" once. He uses the second person pronoun, "you" only twice. And then ironically he is speaking to himself. This self absorption will later come back to haunt him.

Alas, his wonderful plans and reveries are soon cut short. God breaks in on his daydream as he does for all of us and blasts him as a fool. "Fool" was such a strong word at the time that Jesus forbade his followers from ever using it. Yet the rich man deserves the reproach because he has

been cavorting as if there were no God to whom he is responsible. Psalm 14:1 sums up the man and his situation well, “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’. Their deeds are loathsome and corrupt.”

The parable ends with God reminding the rich man of what he should have been preparing all his days...his death. The man says, “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 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 towards God.

There are a couple of things that focus our mind on what we need to do with our lives. God loves us so much that he is not going to let us go without any warnings. We Die!

I know of a girl who phoned her mother from college to say she had arranged a ride home with friends to surprise her younger sister at her birthday party but never made it through the front door. I know of a young man who was a member of my former congregation in Montgomery, Alabama. A great football player, scholarship to Auburn 18 years of age who stood at attention with the whole team before the start of the Lee vs. Lanier game, as his sister sang the National Anthem and his whole family looked on proudly from the stands, who never heard the last note. I know of a woman, celebrating her 50th birthday with her husband and children, she sat down to eat her birthday cake but slumped over on her son’s shoulder dead of an aneurism before ever picking up her fork. We’ve all heard of someone leaving the doctor’s office, like my dad, with the words of the doctor ringing in his ears, “Mr. Hinck you have the health of a much younger man.” Two weeks later he died of a heart attack. As the Gospel reminds us, we know neither the day nor the hour.

To make plans while not being rich toward God and not remembering we are going to die. How foolish is that? In his great love for us, not only does he give us grace to be with him in this life and the life to come, not for just getting over the doorstep, but abundant blessings and even warnings. Not to care and not to love would be to just let us go our own way. But our Lord doesn’t do that. He wants us to know where our eternal security is, and it isn’t the possessions of this life, but his eternal love and what he wants us to do with our possessions, and it isn’t wrapped up in greater barns, greater closets, greater storage rooms, or bigger garages...it’s loving the people around us and in loving God.

In a lively sequence of colorful comments, Jesus drives home the ramifications of the parable.

“Don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There’s far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down with a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more.

Has anyone by fussing before the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? If fussing can't even to that, why fuss at all? Walk into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don't fuss with their appearance-but have you ever seen color and design quite like them. If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?"

What I'm trying to get you to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can't respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you both know God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God initiative, God provisions. You'll find your everyday concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.

"Be generous, give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bank robbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can count on. It's obvious isn't it? The place where your treasure is is the place you will want to be, and end up being."

(Luke 12:22-34, *The Message*)

But as the story sinks into our imagination, and we are confronted with it, we find that our resources get in the way of realizing our urgent need for God. Wealth is the opposite condition; we have far more than enough, and in the process of building a barn that can handle the "more than enough" our language is emasculated of the personal and relational. We lose our basic sense of neediness, God neediness, and lose interest in the language of prayer.

In our preoccupation with bigger barns, and seeking the security we forget about asking for bread for our friend. But as the story sinks into our imagination, making plans for depending on our stuff for security and building bigger barns suddenly seems pretty small potatoes compared to asking for three loaves of bread for a friend.

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