

The Treasure of God

Luke 12:13-21

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The other day, an interesting bit of advice arrived in my email box, entitled, "The five simple things for happiness."

1. Free your heart from hatred
2. Free your mind from worries
3. Live simply
4. Give more
5. Expect Less

We have a similar message of advice in our scripture passage this morning. Jesus was teaching a crowd of people. Someone asked him to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance. You know the story. Parents have died, and now it's time to divide up the home and assets. Siblings start to argue. People get greedy and someone feels cheated. Jesus isn't interested in getting in the middle of this family dispute. Instead, he tells the crowd a story that begins by warning them to take care because life does not consist of an abundance of possessions. Then he tells a parable about a lucky rich man whose land produced so abundantly that he had to pull down barns to build bigger ones in order to store his grain. The man decides that he has ample goods for years to come, so he can relax and eat, drink and be merry. Then, on the night that he makes this decision, he dies and God calls him a fool. Jesus ends by saying: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich towards God."

To be honest, I was a bit dismayed to discover that this was the Gospel reading for today. It is a tough scripture for a summer communion Sunday. After all, Jesus seems to be describing modern day retirement. Commercials on television tell us that if we invest in certain ways and save carefully, we can retire and have fun. It is kind of grim to envision God calling us fools when we die.

It is clear in this text that Jesus is warning us about being greedy. Greed is not the way of God. It is interesting to look at the characteristics of the rich man to see what Jesus means by greed. The man is very self-centered. He talks to himself, first debating where he should store his crops, then talking to his soul, saying: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." There is nothing in his internal conversation about others. It is all about him.

I am sure we all know people like this. They aren't much fun to be around. Whenever they talk, they talk about themselves. They like to tell you all about how great they are and how much stuff they have. Sometimes, it is almost like a two year-old saying "me, me, me."

By pointing out the personality of the man, Jesus invites us to a different way of being—the way of generosity. Jesus is very clear that as people of faith we need to work for the

good of others. To be generous is to be a part of the kingdom of God. Jesus encourages us to shift our conversation with our souls from "me, me, me" to "how can I share?" By example, Jesus shares with us: he feeds us with loaves and fishes, he heals, he teaches, he gives his life. We are encouraged to follow in his footsteps; that is what it means to be a church.

First Church has a history of sharing and caring for others. Our history is filled with stories of how we have cared for the wider community throughout the centuries. A few weeks ago, I was fascinated to learn that in the late 19th century, someone left a trust to care for the widows of the church. This is a very biblical thing to do. In the Old Testament we are taught to care for widows and children, so in a time before social security, a parishioner left money to care for widows. The tradition continues with changing concerns from year to year. When we put our minds together to care for others, we follow through. I was at a meeting the other night where Geordie commented that just last summer we didn't even have a site for a Habitat House, and next month there will be a ceremony celebrating the completion of the house.

Jesus was not just thinking about what we should *do* for others, however. He was talking about the way we need to mold our hearts. Instead of having self-serving attitudes, we are encouraged to become generous souls. When transformed by the spirit of generosity, we encounter the treasure of God.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a story titled "Two Old Men," that conveys this attitude. Two men, Efim and Elisha lived in a Russian village. When they were younger, they agreed to take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see the holy sites. As the years passed, Efim kept putting off the journey because he had work to do and money to make. One day, Elisha convinces him to go on the pilgrimage, and they both leave on the journey with 100 rubles. Some weeks after they were traveling, they stopped to buy bread. Efim still had water for his meal, but Elisha did not. Elisha decided to go to a hut and ask for water. While he was gone, Efim fell asleep. When he woke up, he could not find Elisha. He decided Elisha must have gone on ahead of him, so he walked on to the next town. Elisha was not in the next town or the next.

Efim kept looking for him, and hoped that he would find him in Jerusalem. When Efim got to the Holy City, he joined the crowds of many pilgrims there to see the sacred sites. One day, he thought he saw Elisha off in the crowds, but Efim could not get to him. The next day, the same thing happened, and the next. Disappointed that he couldn't reconnect with his friend, he finally returned to his village in Russia. When he got there, he was surprised to see Elisha and asked him about being in Jerusalem. Elisha told him that he got to Jerusalem with his heart, but not his feet. He explained that on the day he went to the hut, he found that the family was very sick. He stayed with the family for a number of days to care for them, feed them and help them heal. While he was there, he used all his money, so he had to return to the village without going to Jerusalem. Tolstoy ends the story by leaving the reader up in the air. Who really got to Jerusalem? Efim or Elisha?

When our hearts are molded into the ways of generosity, we come face to face with the Holy. Our caring doesn't have to be complex ó a smile at the grocery store with a simple word of kindness can often mean as much to someone during a day as any financial contribution. The key is to use our life as a pilgrimage of becoming transformed into generous beings, so that when our time comes, we know that our hearts have encountered the treasure of God.

May God be with us on the journey. Amen.

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