

Sermon for Sunday, July 31, 2016

Clearing the Way

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” and he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 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, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

The Word of the Lord

And let us pray

Holy God, pour out your spirit—may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you—this we pray in the name of your son Jesus Christ, who is our rock and our redeemer. Amen

A man approaches Jesus with a request: Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

It’s an interesting request. In Jesus day, tradition dictated that the oldest son would receive the inheritance, and then divide it with the other siblings. But in this case, something has gone wrong—we don’t know what’s happened exactly but for some reason, the older sibling is holding on to all the assets...this man is being denied what he believes he is entitled to—so in his eyes, it’s a question of justice...Seeing Jesus as a religious authority, he asks him to step in and convince his brother to share the inheritance.

But then Jesus responds—in an unexpected way: “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you,”

What! Jesus —this man has been denied his fair share—this is a question of justice, common Jesus--it’s time to step in!

But Jesus doesn’t stop there...he turns to the crowd and proclaims, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Apparently, according to Jesus, what this man is asking for—isn’t a question of justice; there’s something deeper happening.

So, in order to make his point, Jesus tells a parable—“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 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 ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

This story sounds so harsh...

It really sounds as though Jesus is against someone who has had a record breaking year—who is living every farmer's dream scenario—to have a crop yield so much that you have to tear down your barns and build larger ones just to store it... that's amazing!

And yet, Jesus is using this as an example of something not to do...

We get a clue of what's going on, in the fact that the man in this story is somehow all alone.

When he sees the abundance of his crop, he realizes that he needs to come up with a plan—he needs a good strategy for what to do with those resources and the best way to store the produce.

But instead of calling up some trusted friends or advisors, or maybe gathering his farm hands in for a strategy session, he asks himself... “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops.”...

Apparently there is no one else he can consult...so he comes up with a plan by himself...He has no relationships...

His plan goes like this:

“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods...”

He, and he alone, will pull down his barns and build larger ones...

In fact he's so excited about this plan, he imagines standing back, after it's all done and saying “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.”

Not only is he alone in the tearing down and building of the barns, but he is the only one who is going to reap the benefits of the harvest...

It all sounds great—not a bad plan...

But then God comes in and ruins everything...

“You fool!” this very night your life is being demanded of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

This is a pretty harsh response...What is it about his plan that gets him called out by God?

While it's not stated directly in the story, Jesus uses a word to set up the parable—Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

Greed is a tricky word...it's one of those words I think we would all agree, we hope that our family and friends wouldn't use it to describe our character.

But, I think we can also agree, while we may not want to admit it, there's a little, maybe a slight hint, of greed in all of us.

When Jesus told this parable, his audience was Jewish—which means they all knew the exodus story.

When God led the Israelite people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. The wilderness was just how it sounds...barren. A desert, filled with sand, mountains, rocks, more sand, and very few living things. Finding enough food in the wilderness for all those people was difficult.

In fact, food was so scarce, the Israelites began to long for what they had back in Egypt...you know...the place where they had been slaves but where they also had all the bread they could possibly want...

Thankfully, God was listening: “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’” (Ex. 16.12)

In the morning the Israelites discovered a fine flaky substance on the ground—and when they saw it they said: “What is it?” which is how it got the name Manna—manna literally means “What is it?” It was bread—and the Israelites were told: “gather as much of it as each of you needs...and let no one leave any of it over until morning.”

But of course...humans are humans...and they didn’t listen...some people chose to save some of it until morning—but when they woke up, they discovered that it didn’t last, it was filled with worms...

However, they also discovered, that the ground was covered again with fresh manna—every morning they gathered as much as they needed...but by the middle of the day, it melted. (Ex. 16.16-21)

This seems like a strange story—why on earth would God provide bread that couldn’t be kept overnight? What was God thinking? They were in the wilderness—they had no resources or supplies—nothing they could eat...having a little extra bread doesn’t seem like a lot to ask for...

But the Israelites hadn’t been God’s people for very long—they didn’t know who God was and there were some definite trust issues...

By providing fresh manna each morning—God was revealing who God truly is, a God who is faithful, who hears and answers the cry of his people. This was really about relationship—would the Israelites trust God’s promise—or would they try to do it all on their own?

It may sound weird to tie greed into this story—but I think greed is connected to one of the most basic human emotions; fear. In this case, fear of scarcity—that there wouldn’t be enough—The Israelites knew their needs—they recognized that there wasn’t a lot of food, and therefore it made sense to keep some manna overnight...

But God also made a promise—a promise to provide—the Israelites were learning to trust God’s faithfulness, instead of giving in to their own fear.

In the parable, it’s his greed, fueled by fear of scarcity that closes him off to others, and makes him blind to the gifts God has given him.

In this story, the man doesn’t seek God for guidance in what to do with the harvest or reach out to others for advice. He doesn’t even acknowledge that it was the land that produced the abundant crop...not his actions...and he fails to see, that there’s so much food, he could never eat it all...

Jesus wasn’t knocking the man for attempting to secure his crops and make plans for the future...

But Jesus was asking the question: what do you trust and where do you find security? Do you trust in the things you own and what you are able to save for yourself? Or in the God who created everything that is seen and unseen, the God who created you and gave you the gifts and abilities you have, the God who created the land which produced the incredible harvest for you...What do you trust...where do you find security?

This is a demanding text—because it asks us to take a closer look at how we view our money and all our resources. And I hope you hear, that Jesus isn’t against, savings accounts, or being a good steward of our resources—but when we listen to the voice of fear, and allow our desire for security to take over, suddenly we find greed creeping in, and the hardest part, is that there is never enough to satisfy...

Toward the end of our service today, we will pray the Lord's Prayer together—and in it we will say “give us this day our daily bread”...

Part of our faith is acknowledging that we are dependent on God for all that we have, even the food that is on our table.

In our culture it's strange to have this kind of reliance—as a country we pride ourselves on saying that we can take care of ourselves, and make it on our own...but the gospel runs in contradiction to that.

We are called to humble ourselves and acknowledge that all we have and all we are is a gift from God, and we cannot take it with us when we go...we are, in truth, dependent on the one who gives us life.

This isn't meant to sound scary...

Because we are dependent on the one who calls us beloved. All week long, during VBS our students heard the good news, that God says “you are my beloved”... “you are my beloved”—we are dependent on the one who calls us beloved...

So...the question is, will we live as though that's true? Will we acknowledge the gifts that God has given us, and seek wisdom and discernment on what to do with them? Will we accept our need for God and for the body of Christ? Will we choose not give into the voice of fear that tells us we live in scarcity? Or will we trust the faithfulness of God, and believe that there is an abundance, and more than enough to go around...

In the name of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.

Friends, God gives us more than enough for the journey, let us respond by bringing forth our tithes and offerings, so the good news can be spread here in St. Louis and beyond.

Rev. Melanie A. Smith
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
St. Louis, MO 63124
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