

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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We hear in all four Gospels that Jesus embraces the role of teacher so that he can help people see the presence of God among them and point them towards a better way of life. Today in our lesson from Luke's gospel, we see Jesus teaching again. A crowd was gathered around Jesus, listening intently to what he had to say. Jesus just finished saying, "When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say." Then suddenly, out of the blue, someone in the crowd shouts to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." The man interrupts the helpful teaching with a demand, drawing attention to himself and showing little regard for those who really want to hear what Jesus was going to tell them. We may remember that last week, Jesus told you to ask and we will receive. But this week, Jesus seems a bit upset being asked in such a rude display. And he basically says, "I don't know who you are or what you're talking about! I am not a judge and have no authority here at all."

This answer Jesus gives seems abrupt and impatient but can you blame him? He is teaching about important spiritual matters, and giving very important advice to all the disciples, making this stranger's interruption more striking. After all, if one of us were midway through an important lecture, we would not be very happy if someone raised his hand to ask for advice on how to do estate planning!

I have to say that I would question the man's motives and it seems the only explanation for someone's making such an intrusion is that this person is preoccupied with his own issues, which seems to be money at this moment. This stranger had not really been listening to Jesus at all but had been playing worries about his financial woes over and over in his head. When we pay attention only to what is going on in our head, we lose track of where the conversation is going. So when there was a lull in Jesus' speech, he burst in with this inheritance question, not noticing that it was not a good time to bring it up.

Even though Jesus was not pleased at this interruption, and made the abrupt remark, he recognized what was going on here and so immediately offers some warnings about greed. What's more, Jesus uses the occasion to offer up a very brief and unusual parable about a secular figure with secular issues.

But it is precisely this secular atmosphere and the complete isolation of this rich man that delivers this parable's punch. This man is completely out there on his own, doing his own thing with no reference to anything or anyone else. Even this parable's dialogue is actually a monologue--the only person this rich man talks to is himself!

It was not sinful that this man had possessions, had big fields and sizeable barns in which to store his grain. It was not a bad thing, either that he put his good business sense to work in producing a huge crop. This world needs people who know how to get things done, who know how to read the market, and put all that knowledge into the production of necessary goods and services. Jesus knew this, too, and still knows it. Presumably this man could have stored up some significant riches AND have been rich toward God at the same time.

If it is not sinful to have these possessions, something else must be problematic because we know that Jesus tells parables in order to prove a point. In the parable, the rich man is called a fool. We start to get a glimpse into the problem when we examine what the word fool means in scripture. Scholars tell us that In the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament a fool was anyone who fails to notice how the world works. They spit into the wind, saw off the branch they're sitting on, constantly try to row their boat against the current because they simply do not pay attention to how life works. Fools are also unteachable and refuse to listen when others point these things out for them. These people then become isolated because others give up on them.

The rich man, then, is a fool because he does not see what is right in front of him. He has made grand plans to take care of himself into the future but does not have a right relationship with his possessions. The New Revised Standard Version reads, "This very night your life is being demanded of you." But when we examine the Greek, it says, "They have demanded your life." We do not know for sure who "they" were, who it was that is demanding the life of the farmer? Some have suggested that they were his possessions. He no longer owned his possessions; they owned him. His life no longer revolved around taking care of himself and others, it was consumed by taking care of his grain.

We may want to dismiss this man, and say it does not apply, but can we really say that? We live in a consumer society where everyone is encouraged to more and more stuff. We are told that having these things will make us happy. But then they need to work more and more hours to pay for what they have purchased.

We are told that more stuff, driving the right car, living in the right neighborhood means that you are more important, carry more power, have more privilege. But here is the reality. A recent survey from the World Health Organization and the Harvard Medical School indicated that we in the United States are the most depressed people in the world (1)! Just under ten percent of us suffer from some sort of bipolar disorder or from chronic minor depression and over eighteen percent of us suffer from some anxiety disorder. Our numbers far surpass those in other developed countries (Germany, Japan, and Italy) and some of the underdeveloped countries are far, far less depressed than we are (the Ukraine, Mexico, and Nigeria). Our great wealth isn't the answer, is it?

Jesus is trying to let the rich man know that he may think that he is doing well, but his trust is misplaced by placing it into something fragile. We may have money today, but who is to say we

will still have it tomorrow? Money is something we need in order to live in this world. But it needs to be put in proper perspective. We need to be careful that we are not controlling the money, not the other way around. And we also need to remember that when we are gone from this earth, all our money does not come with us. There may be a saying in our culture He who dies with the most toys wins. But what does he win? Does the money provide for you after you are dead? Does it give your body more power?

We know the answer to these questions, our money is left to our heirs and we lose all control over it. So it is more correct to say, He who dies with the most toys, still dies.

Knowing this fact we can complain with the writer of Ecclesiastes that all is vanity or we can make a different choice that frees us. We can choose to not be controlled by our money or by anything else that would get in the way in our relationship with God. We can use our money wisely and not spend all our time worrying about getting more so that we starve spiritually as we become rich. We can let God be God in our lives rather than letting something else become our God. When we focus on smaller gods the truth is that we have less and less time to spend with God. God has chosen us, has marked us at our baptism and divine children. And for our part we can become rich towards God, placing our trust in someone steadfast and worthy of our trust. Then we will not be the ones called fool.

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