

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost C 2022
July 31, 2022
Luke 12:13-21
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

Earlier this week, while Robert and I were visiting my cousins in the London area, we also went to visit a cathedral and two small country churches. All three buildings date back to the eleventh or twelfth centuries, which makes them about 1000 years old – mind-boggling when you consider that the oldest church in the continental United States, San Miguel Mission in Sante Fe, New Mexico, dates to the early 1600s!... Anyway, as we were walking through Southwark Cathedral on Monday, my cousin, Liz, commented, “I always have mixed feelings about cathedrals like this. They’re beautiful, and I appreciate the history, but I can’t help thinking that all the money that once went into building them and still goes into maintaining them could be used to help a lot of people in need...” I nodded and said, “Yeah, I know what you mean. I was just thinking how impressive this cathedral is, but also how incompatible it is with the teachings of Jesus.” You see, friends, as I walked through the cathedral, I was remembering that massive church buildings like Southwark were commissioned by wealthy and powerful church leaders and nobility, but they were built on the backs of poor laborers who had no choice in the matter. Cathedrals often took decades to build, which meant that generations of poor families were forced into dangerous and back-breaking work. These ornate houses of worship also took a heavy toll on the people in terms of taxes, and while the buildings were dedicated to the glory of God, they also brought prestige and more wealth to local princes and bishops. So, given this background, I’m sure you can see why I, like my cousin, have mixed feelings about such buildings. As I said, I can appreciate the history of such buildings, but at the same time I find them to be at odds with the teachings of Jesus. Consider this: Throughout the gospels, we see that Jesus has deep compassion for those he calls “the least of these who are my sisters and brothers.” He also teaches his disciples that the way we treat his sisters and brothers is the way we treat him, and he warns that we will be held accountable for how we act and for how we fail to act.

On Wednesday, two days after our visit to Southwark Cathedral, Liz’s husband, John, took us to see two smaller country churches not far from their home. Both were built in the twelfth-century Romanesque style, which is a much simpler style of building. I couldn’t help noticing that in contrast to cathedrals like Southwark, these country church buildings were -- and, in some cases, still are -- a central gathering place for the people of the local community, regardless of economic status. As we stepped into the ancient church of St. Peter and St. Paul, we were immediately hit with the dank smell of old stone. I said to Robert, “Now this is an old church! Imagine all the people who’ve been in this church. Imagine all the things this church building has seen and heard over the centuries, and imagine the stories this building could tell, if it could talk!...” A short time later, John and I were walking through the cemetery in the church yard, and he said to me, “During the COVID lockdown, I used to go for a walk and then come and sit on a bench here or in another churchyard. I know some people might think that’s a bit weird, but I find it very peaceful being in a cemetery.” I replied, “I don’t think it’s weird. I also like cemeteries because they’re peaceful and because they make you think about your own mortality. Cemeteries remind us that life is short and help us discern what’s truly important. After all, none of us knows how much time we have, and so, we should do our best to live in a way that shows

compassion and care for others.” John, who’s no stranger to death, having lost both a son and a grandson in recent years, nodded in agreement and responded in his gentle way, “Well, that’s it, isn’t it?!...”

As I’ve reflected on these conversations with my cousin and her husband, I’ve also thought about how the two of them live in a wide web of relationships. Both of them are retired teachers, who are now generously caring for extended family in various ways. Their door is always open to their wide circle of friends, and their hearts are always open to helping their neighbors in need.... So, when I turned to preparing this sermon, I couldn’t help being struck by the contrast between the rich community in which Liz and John live and the impoverished isolation of the rich man in Jesus’ teaching parable. Let’s take a closer look at today’s gospel reading, and I’ll try to explain what I mean....

When a man shows up and asks Jesus to intervene on his behalf in an inheritance dispute with his brother, Jesus lets it be known that it’s not his job to be judge or arbitrator of such matters. Then, without missing a beat, he turns to the whole group of disciples and warns against the soul-killing danger of greed by telling the parable we just heard. In a nutshell, the rich man in Jesus’ parable is so enamored of his own wealth that he has an “I”-problem.... Sitting all alone on his ivory throne, he thinks only of himself and his own material well-being: “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....’”¹ Notice that there’s no sense of community and no gratitude here. This man makes no mention of providing for the farm workers who’ve labored to produce his abundant crops. In a similar vein, he offers no thanks to God; in fact, he doesn’t seem to know God at all, as evidenced by the fact that he believes he can feed his “soul” with material goods!... Again, the rich man has an “I”-problem. His self-centeredness gets in the way of his ability to see that everything he has is a gift from God. And yet his spiritual blindness is only a symptom of the cancerous disease to which he’s succumbed: the disease of idolatry, which has turned him into a hollow shell... To sum up, the problem boils down to what Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels: “No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and wealth.”²

Now, let’s bring today’s gospel message home and ask, “What does all this have to do with you and me?...” Actually, it has a lot to do with us! It has a lot to do with us because we live in a world that worships and serves the false god Mammon, aka wealth. We live in a world where the rich fool is a trope. Everywhere we look it seems there are “rich fools” who are in deep spiritual trouble because they believe their material goods belong solely to them, and they’d rather hoard their wealth than share it.... And here’s the rub, friends: Even though you and I don’t consider ourselves wealthy, sometimes we are the “rich fools” who succumb to the seductive power of greed, as we think to ourselves, “I worked hard for this. It’s mine. Why should I share it with anyone else?!” I wonder: Can you see how this attitude is at odds with our faith, which teaches that everything we have is a gift from God?... Throughout the Bible we see God calling God’s people to account for our hoarding of God’s gifts, for our misuse of wealth, and for our mistreatment of other people. God calls us to account because God’s gifts are never meant to be

¹ Luke 12:18-19.

² Matthew 6:24.

hoarded for oneself; on the contrary, they're always given for the sole purpose of serving the greater good of all God's children. In fact, at the end of the parable Jesus tells in today's gospel reading, God calls the rich man a "fool" because he's hoarded all his worldly goods for himself and has failed to be "rich toward God..."³ So, you may be wondering: What exactly does it mean to be "rich toward God?" Well, clearly, God doesn't need our gifts, since all things belong to God in the first place!... The Bible is, however, very clear that being rich toward God means sharing with God's other children whatever gifts God has entrusted to you, including your time, talent, and treasure.... Here I want to be crystal clear that just because you and I aren't super rich, we're not off the hook! Jesus' parable about the rich fool is a cautionary tale for us, too, because ordinary people like you and I also tend to forget that all we have and all we are is a complete and total gift from God. And when we forget that God is the source and end of our life and all life, we, too, may develop an "I"-problem that distorts the way we see our neighbor. Over time this kind of spiritual blindness may lure us away from God's commandment to love and serve our neighbor. To say it another way, instead of using the things we've been given in loving other people, we end up loving things and using people. And that, my friends, is surely the way that leads to death!...

And yet...the Good News is that our gracious and generous God loves us and doesn't want us to die before we die! Indeed, our God is always reaching out to us in many and various ways to heal our "I"-problem, to lift us out of our impoverished isolation, and to weave us back into a rich web of relationships. That's why Jesus tells this parable. He tells it because he wants us to know that true life — a life of security and joy and abundance — is found only in a loving, living relationship with God and neighbor.... Jesus makes it quite clear that how you and I live here and now is an urgent matter — a matter of life and death.... Again, life is short, and none of us knows how many days we have left. So, let's make today the day we turn back and ask God to heal our "I"-problem. Let's make today the day we take off our blinders and throw away our ear plugs, so that we can see and hear our neighbors in need. And let's make today the day we ask God to help us use our unique, God-given gifts to bring healing and hope and new life to others, for the sake of this world God so loves.... In the words of the Psalmist, let us pray:

Gracious God,
Source of life and of every good gift,
"so teach us to number our days
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom."⁴
Help us to live this day and every day
in light of the new life
revealed through your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

³ Luke 12:21b.

⁴ Psalm 90:12.