

“Get a Life” (Luke 12:13-21)

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What would you think if someone you thought was a good friend said to you, “Get a Life!” Well, that’s what Jesus has a way of saying to all of us: “Get a Life!” What really matters to you? What takes priority? How do we even get around to asking such questions?

The Bible gets around to asking such questions over and over again. Such a scene opens up this morning when a man in the crowd around Jesus speaks up and says “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

That has a familiar ring to it: asking for money. Maybe he needed the money just to stay afloat. Maybe he was counting on his father’s estate to give him the life of leisure he longed for. Perhaps he was doing OK, but he couldn’t bear to see his sibling doing even better. It sounds like the familiar cries of children that every parent recognizes, “Dad, he’s not sharing! Or “Mom, she’s getting more than me!”

The truth is that it’s not just kids who worry about such matters. In the Post sports section last weekend was a report about Dimitri Young of the Washington Nationals, signing a two-year contract for something like 10 million dollars. That’s not an unusual story. Sports celebrities are measured by money. “Style” section reports about “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix” and other summer films inevitably focus on box office gross compared to the tallies of others. Wherever you turn in the news or other media, managing, making, or winning money is a constant theme.

Jesus was saying, “Get a life” when he says to the man in the crowd: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, (for) a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Now, we all agree that life is about more than money. We think we agree that money can’t buy happiness — maybe a little anesthetic or diversion at times — but surely not happiness. But Jesus talks about money and its grip on us because it involves issues that matter a lot, such as where we put our confidence, how we look to the future, and where we find meaning in life.

Most of us would say that the most important struggle of life is not the fight for “abundance” of material things, but for “abundance” of spirit, character, and relationships. But Jesus knows that greed nonetheless insinuates itself into the human soul in all kinds of subtle ways.

So he goes on in the Gospel today to tell a provocative story about a successful man who was having a string of good crops. He was looking to the future, deciding how to go from bigger to better, and then relax and take it easy. “Then, I will eat, drink, and be merry,” he says. But it doesn’t turn out that way, as you can see from the rest of the story. And you could probably guess that it wouldn’t turn out that way.

First of all, the man seems to have a familiar disease: “Me-it is.” Before the voice of God weighs in at the end, the entire parable is told from the perspective of someone who clearly believes that the primary focus of life is him. The words “himself,” “me,” “my,” “I,” “myself,” and “you” (referring to himself) occur twelve times in just three verses! If someone had quoted the Psalmist who said “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it”, this man probably would have said “well, you should have seen it before **I** got hold of it!”

And second, the man also had something that we could call “Storage Stress” or “Stuff-it is.” All he could think of was acquiring “more,” even if it meant tearing down old barns to build bigger ones. Most of us don’t think these days about building bigger barns, but we do know about The Container Store, self-storage units, and even tearing down perfectly good homes in order to build bigger ones on the same property.

We all know something about the cravings for more comfort, more consumption, more cash-fed euphoria to buy more stuff from the stuff-mart of your choice, and to hold on to it, laying it up for the future when “I am going to take it easy:” “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat drink, be merry.’” The trouble is, of course, that if you have the disease of “stuff-it is,” you can never take it easy, because you’re always trying to find ways to get more.

But there comes a time when God says to such a person, “You fool! What if this very night your life will be demanded from you?” There was a New Yorker magazine cartoon a few years ago that pictured a man lying on his deathbed. Gathered close around him were his wife and children. The man motions for them to come close to hear his final words and he struggles to say, “I should have bought . . . more . . . stuff.” Is there even a remote possibility that these would be your last words?

Actually, there’s a well-known story about a man who got to read his own obituary eight years before he died. It was 1888, and Alfred Nobel was a Swedish chemist who had made a fortune inventing and producing dynamite. His brother Ludwig had just died in France, but an editor had confused the names of the two brothers and the headline read, “Merchant of Death is Dead!” The obituary described a man who had gotten rich by helping people kill one another. That man, Alfred Nobel, read his own obituary! He was so shaken by the appraisal of his life that he resolved from that day forward to use whatever resources he had to change his legacy. When he really died, eight years later, he left more than nine million dollars to fund awards for people whose work benefited humanity. The award, as you know, became known as the Nobel Prize.

Alfred Nobel had an unusual opportunity: to look at his life and still have the chance to change it. How different that is from people who have used up their entire lives making “enough” money to enjoy life! How different that is from the writer in the book of Ecclesiastes, our first lesson this morning, who cynically and repeatedly moans that his work and life have amounted to nothing.

Although Jesus’ parable ends in the spirit of the Ecclesiastes reading, he doesn’t stop there. Instead, Jesus suggests that we be “rich toward God.” What does he mean by that? If you pay attention to the words of our offertory hymn this morning you may get a clue.

To be rich toward God refers to a life-long, spiritual pilgrimage toward what I call “accepting our acceptance” - accepting the biblical statement that God has shown his unconditional love for us and that “while we were yet sinners,” he sent his only Son to live and die for us. So, Jesus says, “do not be anxious about your life.” If you know God accepts you, you don’t have to gain acceptance by having “things” or by achieving the status that money and possessions confer. It takes most of us

many years of living to discover that truth - and some of us never do - but there is another way to discover how to be "rich toward God:" figuring out what we value in life.

Years ago, someone suggested to me that if I wanted to know what was important to me, I should look at my checkbook and my calendar. You might want to do the same thing after you get home from church this morning. All we have is time, abilities, and money. Where are those resources going? Jesus puts it this way: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." "Richness toward God" can be found if we look at where we give our time, our money — and our hearts - and refocus and reinvest them in what truly matters.

I know that we all think about "identity theft" these days. But maybe we need to hear more about "identity recognition."

Wouldn't you agree with me that Jesus, with this parable and so much of his teaching, has gone straight to the heart of what it is to "get a life"— a life worth eternalizing?

AMEN.