



The Inclusive Community

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 1, 2010

St. Paul's UCC, Nutley

Trust

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

It is striking how much human nature and behavior remain the same through the centuries. Our technology changes, our understanding of the world changes but our emotions, problems, questions and needs remain consistent.

We see this clearly in today's passage from Luke. There is not a single item in this story which is different from the issues we deal with today.

The passage opens with sibling rivalry and a fight about a will or inheritance. Someone from the crowd, no name or description is given, tries to play an end run around his brother by using Jesus as his defense.

He says: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Someone feels he has been short-changed and wants equity. The issue here is money. An aggrieved brother wants his share. Most likely, he does not have a legal claim. He would have dealt with lawyers already. So he uses Jesus to get moral leverage against his brother.

In family discussions and legal offices today, the same problem arises, the same anger and the same maneuvering.

Jesus will not get trapped.

Listen to what he says: "Friend, I cannot be a judge or even an arbitrator here. You two work that out as best you can."

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Then Jesus analyzes the situation insightfully. He turns from the brother and he addresses the crowd. He does not indict either brother but goes to the core of the dispute between them. He says to the crowd. "We all can have problems with greed. Someone is often taking advantage of another. We do this because we are convinced that if we owned a lot and had many possessions we would be content. Our problems would be solved. We trust in money as though it were God. Money, we believe, will bring us peace, enhance our life, earn us love, make us virtuous. If we had money it would, just like God's Spirit, make us generous and honest and creative."

Jesus refers to greed, one of the seven deadly sins. The essence of greed, we know, is that we never have enough. And the more we get, the more we want. If we have 50 rooms in our home and a neighbor has 72, we feel deprived and want a 90 room house. Never enough. If we make five million dollars a year, we want the twenty-five million dollar a year job. Never enough. It makes no sense. Greed feeds itself. And it cannibalizes us.

Like an addiction, a focus on money requires higher and higher fixes for ever lessening "kicks" from the addictive behavior.

Then Jesus says, in his best fashion, " Let me tell you a story".

"This story is about a very rich man. A Wall Street insider. He made his money on derivatives. He owns a great deal but it is not enough. It never is. He says to himself: I have no place to store my crops, my assets. Swiss banks are not what they used to be. Off-shore investments are a bit risky. I have so much I do not know how to make it safe anymore.

I know what I will do. Here is the quote: "I will pull down my barns". They are, of course, perfectly good barns. Just not big enough. Not enough rooms. He adds: "I will build larger barns and there I will store my grain and all my goods."

If you look at this passage from Luke, Jesus does something very artful. In the parable, the rich man uses the word "I", "my" constantly. Jesus shows us that he is a narcissist. Narcissism and greed. They go together – toxically. A deadly cocktail that intoxicates and destroys.

Jesus goes psychologically right to the core of this Wall Street mogul. Jesus quotes him as saying: "If I do this, I can say to my soul: 'Soul, you now have it all. Finally, you can relax, (Jesus uses that word) and at long last you will be "happy" (Jesus uses that word.)"

My friends is there anything different in this picture Jesus gives us from the world we live in today?

Then Jesus jolts the audience by having God speak. He quotes God as saying “You fool. You silly, stupid man. On the night you finally finish your project, you will die – not because you are being punished for being greedy and a narcissist but because death cannot be kept away by your bank account, your derivatives, your barns, your stock portfolio. You left out of your calculations your mortality and your humanity. Can vast amounts of money keep you from getting ill or can they make your marriage work or give you loving children or bring you peace? You are a foolish, silly, stupid man. Whoever wins out in this dispute between two brothers over an inheritance will not be happy if he has been greedy and unjust. Tonight you will die. You will not need rooms or barns or a clever lawyer or an astute accountant. You will die. And all your possessions will go to someone else.

You trusted your life to a barn for safe keeping. But your life was meant to be spent. – on love, on making the world better, on building the Reign of God, on compassion. You made all the wrong investments. You put your trust in all the wrong places. Banks love to call themselves “trust, fiduciary institutions, full trust and credit agencies. You put all your trust there.”

God is trustworthy. Period. Life is trustworthy. Period. Love is trustworthy. Period.

The problem with this rich man is that he never used a period. He used commas. And after each comma, he wrote “more” “more” “more”.

Jesus asks the crowd to grow up, to think a bit, to get off the roller coaster, to stop the silliness and to find where they want to put the assets of their lives – in a bigger barn or a bigger heart, in a bigger portfolio or a better soul and spirit, in the Dow Jones or in the God of Israel, in Swiss Banks or the Messiah from Nazareth, in Wall Street or in the Gospel.

Jesus expects us to grow up. Is it not time that we did? Tell me, what do you really trust in now? Think about it.