

Proper 13-C
Aug. 1, 2010
St. Stephen's, Spokane

Three years ago this weekend, I was thrilled to get tickets to Antiques Roadshow when it came to the convention center here. I was serving part-time at the Cathedral and we had found a book as we cleaned out the crypt for a remodeling project – a book published in London in the 17th Century at St. Paul's. It was in bad shape, but I thought it was a treasure. Turned out, it wasn't a treasure – at least in the eyes of Antiques Roadshow. (The evaluator I met with was more interested in Zane Grey than English theology.) But I still got the experience of being in the midst of a great throng of people and an unbelievable amount of stuff that had been hauled out of attics, basements and maybe even barns.

Today's parable about a man who thought he needed a bigger barn triggered that memory for me. This parable of the Rich Fool came in response to a person who asked Jesus to sort out a question over a family inheritance. Instead of getting caught up in this family dispute, Jesus issues a warning about greed – about having too many possessions because 'life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' In other words, life is about more than our 'stuff.'

That's the lesson for the rich fool – a farmer who had a bumper crop one year – such a great crop that his barns couldn't hold it all. So, he said to himself, it would make a lot of sense to get rid of those barns and build bigger ones that would hold even more stuff. That, he reasons, would make him happy, secure and rich.

But he is caught up short by God who puts things into perspective and points out his foolishness: If today were the last day of his life, what good would all of that stuff be? You might be rich, but there is a missing piece if you are not 'rich toward God.'

In one sense, this is another way of saying, “You can’t take it with you.” No matter how much stuff we have and how happy we think it will make us, there isn’t any eternal quality about our bigger barns or overstuffed closets. They are temporary pleasures.

It’s interesting that our lectionary puts the rich fool alongside the reading from Ecclesiastes “All is vanity and a chasing after wind.” This is not what I would call an uplifting reading. (You almost have to read it with a sigh.) Ecclesiastes, sometimes called Quohelah, is from the wisdom literature of Hebrew scripture and probably a compilation of wisdom from a community rather than from an individual.

This particular passage sounds as if it is written by someone who has had a very bad day. Or perhaps is lost in midlife angst. It really is asking, ‘What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of all of our hard work? Why is it that we work hard all of our lives and then have to leave everything to someone who didn’t do the work? From this point of view, life is hard. Work is hard. Life isn’t exactly fair. And all of this is vanity. (By vanity, the author means something like smoke – something without substance that drifts away. You can’t get a grip on it.)

In some ways it is very easy to make connections with these readings in our own life and experience. They raise questions and issues that are timeless – that hook us again and again. Being attached to our stuff (whether it’s crops in the barn or antiques in the basement) is not a new issue but it is a real one. Wondering about the meaning of our existence – the meaning of our hard work – is a question that surfaces for us as well – particularly when we wonder if we are on the right vocational path or when we are under stress. We want to get a grip. Get some security around us. Build something for our future that will last and give us happiness. Those are normal human responses and they seem even more poignant in a time of economic uncertainty. Let’s face it. We long for certainty.

But what these readings do is challenge us to see where the folly is for us. See where a desire for security crosses the line and gets out of control – becomes idolatry. When our stuff, rather than God, becomes the center of our lives. When we lose our sense of perspective.

I used to watch a television show called “Clean Sweep” that helped people reorganize their houses when they had too much stuff. They would start out with cluttered rooms and boxes of accumulated treasures that were hard to part with. Filling up the dining room table, closets, spare rooms.

I think the reason this show appealed to me was that I could identify with these homeowners. I had a basement full of things that my mother asked me to take home with me when she moved from her house to a small assisted living apartment. They were treasures that she wanted to keep in the family. The problem is that we have a small family and I have a small house.

On the show the homeowners took everything outside and sorted through it. Some was sold, some was given away, some was put in the trash. They kept just what they needed. And it was amazing to see how hard this was. People shed tears over old record albums for which they had no record player – or a cheerleading outfit from the 1960s. It was just agony to get rid of them because they were a kind of security.

I’d guess that most of us have accumulated things we don’t need – stashed in the basement or the garage or that unbelievable drawer in the kitchen. (I know there is an Elvis Presley 45 RPM record in my basement somewhere.) But we’re talking about perspective. About where we look for security. What we depend on to be life-giving. The stuff won’t provide that, no matter how much there is.

. One painful truth is that in our culture our success is sometimes measured by our stuff – the amount of it or the quality of it. It’s hard not to buy into that because it has become so much a part of

the way things are. Quietly, though, there are movements toward simplicity. About living well with less – about living in a way more mindful of what others need and what will sustain the earth.

The question that comes to us both from the story of the rich fool and the despair of Ecclesiastes is how might we be open to a deeper meaning – a life lived in relationship to God and others that is not foolishness or vanity. How might we move those piles of stuff out of the way and see our way into a relationship of healthy stewardship? By that I mean that the things we have (and there are many) aren't really ours to possess as much as they are to manage – to care for wisely. To share. To be aware of their source, which is God. To live every day with gratefulness. (I've always wanted to work on a stewardship effort with the title, "An Attitude of Gratitude.")

This is not a particularly new issue. In the fourth century, Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea, commenting on this story of building bigger barns, wrote, "You are the servant of the good God, a steward on behalf of your fellow servants. Do not imagine that everything has been provided for your own stomach. Take decisions regarding your property as though it belonged to another."

In fact, it does belong to another. It belongs to God. We just get to use it.

Being rich toward God is a phrase that has come up more than once in our lectionary this year. Maybe that's what the author of Ecclesiastes was longing for amid all that angst and cynicism and search for meaning. Storing up a treasure of generosity and sharing as a foundation for the future is quite a contrast to storing more stuff in bigger and better barns. Or garages. Or closets. We packrats have our challenges for sure, but the real challenge is a spiritual one. To know the source of all we have. To live in gratitude. To be good stewards who delight in sharing. This is a spiritual practice. It is being rich toward God.

May the foolishness of the rich fool expose our own folly, open our eyes to the abundance that surrounds us and teach us to be good stewards – for God’s sake as well as our own.