

The rich fool, and the fool for Christ

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Rick Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, August 1, 2010.

Thought for the week: What non-material assets are in your estate plan, and how might you improve your spiritual investments (your wealth toward God) ?

Has someone ever said to you, "Will you please tell the new Dean to shorten the service time?" Or, "I wish someone would tell the organist not to play so loud."

Triangulation is an unhealthy form of communication that sets up one person in the triangle to be victim, another to be the perpetrator, and the third to be the rescuer. This model prevents individuals from having healthy, however challenging one-on-one relationship. In our lives it happens all the time. My dad is always asking me to tell my mom she needs to see a doctor for one thing or another.

A man in the crowd tried to triangulate Jesus, "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." This younger brother was playing the victim. He was casting his older brother as the perpetrator. He was inviting Jesus to be the rescuer.

But Jesus, while not using these same labels, was wise to the trap. "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

And as he did on so many occasions, Jesus used the opportunity and energy to raise the exchange to a higher level, sensing the real human dilemma behind the man's request.

In those days, the elder male would have inherited two shares of the estate, and a younger brother would have gotten one share. Evidently this younger brother wanted more. Jesus sensed his envy or deep desire in gaining a larger share. One share was not enough. He wanted more. How much is enough?

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Why did Jesus do so much teaching about money and wealth?

Money is the greatest symbol of power in our lives. During pre-marital counseling, I ask couples why they think religious orders are based on vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience? Money, sex, and power then become topics for our counseling. These three typically frame conversations in divorce counseling: a struggle for an equitable financial settlement, an extramarital affair is oftentimes involved, and a balance of power has not been achieved in the relationship.

Money is a big influence over the life of this congregation. Sometimes we have a difficult time talking about it. Some of us are prevented from giving much to the Cathedral because we know that a large endowment will pay the bills anyway, and we feel our meager pledges aren't really needed. So we keep more of our family budgets for ourselves. This congregation has a national reputation: our barns are full.

Money is emotional. Having a certain amount of it makes us feel secure and powerful. Not having money makes us feel insecure and powerless. Money talks. It can buy friends, influence, position and respect. But how about happiness? Or peace? Or a right and healthy relationship with God? Money can obscure our priorities and become an idol. It is addictive and seductive.

Then he told them a parable.

We cannot file a disclaimer that the story doesn't apply to us because we are not rich. Most of us are rich compared to the world's population, and we are very nervous to tell the truth and admit it. Although our wealth is not in crops, we are rich individually and as a congregation. I often sense guilt in our conversations about money.

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"

I remember the young rich Sr. Warden in my first parish. He had founded a natural health products business and it was booming. He invited me over to his office one day and said, "Rick, I am about to become very wealthy and I need your advice. I have mixed feelings about having so much money and want to do the right thing. First, I want to take care of my parents. Dad has worked hard all his life and his company went bankrupt a couple of years

ago. I want to give mom and dad some of my money. And something else I've wanted to do for a long time is to buy a yacht. I feel a little guilty about doing that, but I was thinking, perhaps the youth group could go out on it from time to time so it wouldn't be just for me and my family. Am I justified in buying it? What should I do?

Dilemma: How am I to manage my wealth? This soliloquy in Luke's gospel is a man talking to himself and leads us into the inner machinations of the human heart and mind in dealing with spiritual life in a world of rampant materialism. Imagine this scenario.

"First I will express my gratitude to God for giving me all these good things. I have plenty to eat, clothes on my back, a house, a loving family, good neighbors, a good job, and crops enough for this year. I have been blessed, and I will give one-tenth of my bounty to the temple."

The man remembered that he was not an island living unto himself, but rather an integral part of a larger community of faith and a citizen of the planet. He realized that he did not really own the land and the bountiful harvest, but that it was God's, and only in his keeping for a time. His role was to be a faithful steward.

He called together a prayer group from the congregation to discern God's will in the situation. They studied the Torah and read from the prophets and wisdom literature...

Like the partridge hatching what it did not lay,
so are all who amass wealth unjustly;
in mid-life it will leave them,
and at their end they will prove to be fools. (Jer 17.11)

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? ...This also is vanity. (Ecc 1.12-14)

Why should I be afraid in evil days, when the wickedness of those at my heels surrounds me,

The wickedness of those who put their trust in their goods, and boast of their great riches?

We can never ransom ourselves,
or deliver to God the price of our life;

(Psalm 49.4-6)

The group spent time in silence and on retreat, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their stewardship decisions. They listened prayerfully to all the members of the congregation asking for their thoughts about what to do with the man's abundant windfall.

Some suggested building bigger barns and setting up an endowment fund; others wanted to build affordable housing; some wanted to establish a school for inner city children who were not getting a quality education; others wanted to purchase a new instrument for the temple; some wanted to share it with other struggling congregations; others envisioned helping the Diocese of Haiti rebuild schools and hospitals for the poor.

As he gave away his wealth, the rich man's life was blessed. He learned to simplify his life style, selling some of his most treasured possessions, and giving the money to the poor. His faith deepened through the experience, and as he became more and more aware of the needs of others, he encouraged others to join him in giving. Some called him a fool.

When he died, God met him and said, "Good and faithful steward. You have inherited the kingdom. Your riches are in heaven."

The problem was not the size of the crop or the amount of wealth. The problem was not building more barns. The problem was not even relaxing, eating, drinking and being merry. The problem was the self-centered attitude that prevented God from using a life and its gifts to help others in need. And the self-sufficiency that was closed to life-changing and life-giving love.

A rich fool or a fool for Christ? What non-material assets are in your estate plan, and how might you improve your spiritual investments (your wealth toward God)? Amen.