

August 1, 2010

Pentecost X, Proper 13, Year C

Hosea 1:1–11

Colossians 3:1–11

Luke 12:13–21

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As you probably know, our bishop, Bishop Chane, has announced his retirement, and the Diocese of Washington has begun a search to nominate candidates to replace him. Last week, the search committee convened a meeting to review a draft profile of the Diocese. The profile describes the Diocese and suggests what we are looking for in a new bishop.

I went to last week's meeting, and a month ago I attended a focus group about this. I've noticed that we have an enormous variety of expectations for our next bishop. Our next bishop needs to be a visionary leader; a prophetic voice in the nation's Capital effectively engaging in advocacy; an able administrator managing many complex and difficult institutions; a leader in the national Episcopal Church and in the international Anglican Communion; a deeply spiritual person; a skilled pastor; a successful and enthusiastic fundraiser; an inspiring communicator; an expert in congregational development. He or she must be accessible, funny, sensitive, energetic, centered, charismatic, supportive. It's a fantasy. I'm pretty sure that Jesus himself would not do.

I recall at the meeting last week a conversation about the kind of evangelization skills expected of the new bishop. One of our fellow parishioners got up and made a statement which I think is increasingly representative of our parish culture. What I understood as the gist of our parishioner's comment was, "Sure, we want a bishop who's an evangelist and supports ministries to evangelize, but each of us has got to see ourselves as evangelists." In other words, the work is not his alone. It's ours.

I thought that it was a helpful comment, reminding us that ministry is a shared responsibility. A new bishop is not going to solve our problems. Any organization, any group of people, be it a family, a church, a corporate office, a nation... any group that is facing a problem is both the problem and the solution to the problem. Mostly problems are not out there, but in here. The solution to any challenge we face is ourselves. We are the solution to our problems – our ability to work together, our tolerance for change, our desire for real inner growth.

Jesus didn't give people quick and easy fixes. He's not a magician or Mr. Fix It. We desire a Messiah who will solve our problems, but in a way that doesn't

require us to change our values, our behavior, our attitudes. But Jesus came to change us, to help us grow in his life.

In today's gospel, a man comes to Jesus asking him to divide his inheritance. Dividing assets, of course, is usually complex and often contentious. In a way, the man is flattering Jesus to say that he trusts him to be fair. It seems he trusts Jesus, who he doesn't really know, more than his brother.

Jesus will have no part of it. Dividing the inheritance is not his work. It's the brothers' job. They need to accept responsibility for it. Their father is dead, and now they want Jesus to arbitrate their dispute because daddy isn't around to do it. Jesus' refusal is an opportunity for them to grow up.

The story suggests the man is more interested in getting his inheritance than he is in maintaining his relationship with his brother. His priorities are out of whack. Jesus suggests that the man examine his values and re-consider them. "Be aware of greed. Guard against it. Life is not about possessions, even if you have a lot." That's a hard message.

First, none of us likes to be told that our values are troubled, that they need to be adjusted. We tend to pride ourselves in our values, think that they're good and sound. Jesus' whole ministry was a radical challenge to the values and norms of his day, and he continues to threaten our status quo, asking us to think more deeply about our norms, the way we see things, and to re-evaluate our conduct and our beliefs.

Second, we have a lot of possessions, and we often have a hard time recognizing how strongly greed motivates and influences us. It's so much a part of our culture. The ever expanding and intensifying media subtly, and not so subtly, encouraging us to consume, that we need more to be happy and content and fulfilled, that our loneliness and despair can be relieved by our next purchase, just as long as it's the right lipstick, or olive oil, or pillow. We compare ourselves to our neighbors, to those in our social circle, and say, "I live more simply, more modestly than they do. I give away more." But the problem is not the media, not our neighbors, it's not out there, it's in us.

The man asking Jesus to divide his inheritance is focused on what he doesn't have. He's striving, trying to improve his sense of self. What does the inheritance mean to him? Money is about more than money. It's sacramental. It shows us what's important to us. What we do with it reveals our values. It's part of the reason we often get touchy talking about money. It reveals so much about ourselves; it's so personal. Would you prefer to post on the web, say on your Facebook page, your bank account and credit card records or full, frontal pictures of yourself naked?

What does money mean to you? Why do we want it? What do we hope that it will get us? If you were to come upon a fortune, what would you do with it?

- Some of us would start spending it. We expect that our purchases make us more attractive to others, more desirable. We can buy ourselves into the right social circles, get friends, impress people, improve our social standing. We can also use it to entertain ourselves and to distract ourselves from unpleasant thoughts and feelings, to avoid unpleasant realities.
- Some of us would use it to influence others and to exercise control. Money is persuasive and attractive. It allows us to exercise power.
- Some of us would relish that our fortune makes us feel superior to other people. Money can give us the aura of importance, significance, sophistication, even wisdom.
- Some of us would try to save it. This is money as protection, as security... the hope that it'll keep us safe. It can insulate us from all kinds of humiliations, both real and perceived. Not spending money, storing it up, of course, is as selfish as spending it.
- And some of us would give it away, at least a sizable portion. Certainly I'd expect that from people in this parish, given my experience in this parish, and the generosity here.

Money is enormously attractive because it gives us a sense of control over life. Who do we want in control... ourselves or God? Jesus says that we either serve money or God. We pursue money to get what only God can give us – a sense of importance, significance, of being valued for who we are and a sense of being safe, a sense of security, a sense of strength to deal with the ups and downs of life. Ultimately, money can't give us those things. It's not going to stop us from dying, or feeling life is meaningless, and the more we pursue it for a feeling of significance or safety, the less significant or safe we feel.

Today's gospel is an opportunity to step back and renew our perspective: God reminds us that our worth and value don't come from money, our meaning and purpose don't come from money, our safety and security don't come from money, our attractiveness and desirability don't come from money. To the contrary, the more we focus on money, the less we value ourselves, the less meaningful our lives seem, the less safe we feel, the less attractive we become.

Jesus gives us a stark choice: trust me or trust money; relax or continue to fret and build barns to store treasures which are fleeting. It requires a deep inner change to release us from the bonds of greed, the anxiety of trusting in our own efforts, to the freedom and peace of trusting Jesus.

Today's gospel is a lot like the scene a couple weeks ago with Mary and Martha, where Mary has chosen the better part and Martha has been distracted, all racing about and anxious. Like Martha, if we're going to choose the better

part, if we're going to try to trust Jesus, not money, we've got to be open to, and desire, and expect, deep inner change. Jesus promises us that he will change our lives. It doesn't happen in a moment, but is the work of our lives.

Jesus is saying that our world is nuts, that its values are sick and upside down, that it leads us to look for treasure in the wrong places. All we need is to trust Jesus, and all will be well. What we are doing here, together, is learning that trust.

Right after today's gospel ends, Jesus says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!" That's good news we can trust.

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