

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

In winter, whenever weather forecasters predict snow, I sarcastically say, “They’re only telling you that so that you’ll go out and buy snow shovels. The national weather bureau is secretly owned by hardware stores.” Now, I know that’s silly, but in our culture, when people get scared, many of them go shopping. Faced with the uncertainties of life, we often think that the way forward is to buy something. Or worse. Seeking comfort, some people turn to unhealthy food or drink, or porn. They fear the way life is, so they seek quick satisfactions.

The particular bad habit Jesus criticizes in today’s parable is storage. The landowner in the parable gets a bountiful harvest, so he tears down his puny silos to build grandiose silos - just to store the grain. He thinks he’s set for life, foolishly unaware that death is near.

After my college years, when I drove off to the seminary in St. Louis, I was proud that all my earthly possessions fit inside my car - all of them. That is no way true today. To fit all my possessions into a single vehicle today, I would have to buy a semi. I’m not alone. Many people have boxes of forgotten possessions piled up in closets. Many others rent storage units so that the possessions that don’t fit into the expanded closets have a place to go. When they cannot find something they believe they own, they go out and buy another one, so the possessions amass.

Even though the storage on a computer does not occupy as much physical space as storage on shelves, we put data we own on backup devices and on the cloud. To go back and review the files, judging what we need to keep and what we could delete, would be time-consuming. So, *that* storage grows. A sociologist friend of mine who has studied end-of-life possessions encourages people to get rid of things. Having things, he argues, is not just space-consuming. It’s time-consuming because you keep going back through seldom-used possessions trying to decide whether or not to keep them. The absence of possessions bestows a freedom that acquiring possessions cannot give.

At its foundation, Jesus’ statements today do not rail against wealth, but against greed. He says, “though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.” Yet for many of us it does. We even think that the way to show love to children is to give them more things. But what are we teaching them? Do we value having kids store up treasures for themselves at the expense of making them rich in what matters to God?

Several New Testament books offer lists of vices, and greed is almost always among them. In today’s second reading, Paul commands the Colossians to put to death “the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry.” Idolatry is an accurate, though painful description of greed. It’s a false god. In the end, it does not bring happiness.

At the beginning of today’s gospel, the man who sets the stage for this parable shouts to Jesus from the crowd, “Tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.” I’m sure Jesus would agree that an inheritance should be justly shared, but he moves the conversation further. If you focus overmuch on what you are owed, you will never learn the joy of what you can give, even in your poverty.

Sunday, August 4, 2019