

# **“Mainstream against Mainstream”**

## **Sermon on Sunday, August 11, 2019**

Based on Luke 12: 13-21

During my years in Munich, one of my roommates stormed home one night, angry and outraged. He was an engineering student with strong religious views, a seeker on a spiritual quest, and had just attended a seminar by a Christian group he was involved with. That night, one of the speakers had chosen to speak about the following topic: “How to make money with God.” That night was also the beginning of the end of his involvement in that group. I still remember the emotion in his voice. He was fed up.

It is quite amazing, isn't it - how people are able to twist the gospel and turn Jesus' core message on its head, thinking they are in fact representing the true thing. “How to make money with God?” That's not even subtle! Let me tell you, it was just like that in the times of Francis and Clare, the two beloved saints who led a grassroots movement in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In their time, the church had in fact learned how to make money with God; the institution in charge of Jesus' teachings had become the largest landowner in the world; she accumulated left and right, she waged war and imposed celibacy upon the priesthood in order to protect her holdings; the princes of the church, the bishops, either thought it was all for the glory of God or worse, they didn't care perverting the gospel. Francis and Clare grew up during those times, secure in the upper crust of medieval Italy, but by God's intervention and mystical encounters with Christ they chose to give all that up and live in solidarity with the poor. They were the Jesus freaks of medieval times. True, they were poor. True, they were looked upon with suspicion by the mainstream. Yet they were rich in all the wonderful ways of the gospel, and many people were fed by their spirit.

If there is any doubt in anyone's mind, today's gospel passage presents the main stream of Jesus' teachings, one of his many warnings against greed. This warning is clothed in the parable of the rich farmer. The message is loud and clear: people, don't allow possessions to possess you! You will sell your soul if you do that. You will get lost! That sounds reasonable enough, except, the challenge for us is that the mainstream of Jesus' teachings unfortunately rubs against the mainstream of our own culture and, very likely, also against our own engrained thinking and lifestyles. We will have to be honest with ourselves. How much of the farmer's anxious mind lives in us? As we look in the mirror, we will have to be kind with ourselves, trusting that our Lord's word is for our own good, not to judge us.

Frankly, I don't need to offer you another sermon on our possessing too much stuff that we don't use. I did that a few weeks ago and I am myself deeply implicated in the lesson. But take an extreme. It is easier to acknowledge a spiritual disease when it has fully revealed itself in the material world. The extreme contemporary version of the farmer is the hoarder. Hoarding is a mental illness. If you have ever been in a home of someone who simply, tragically cannot part with any possessions and keeps adding to the chaos against better judgment, you know what I mean. People like that become the slaves of their own things, which is the judgment that comes down on them. But how does hoarding develop in the first place? I am not a psychologist, but I suspect that it has a lot to do with our need for comfort and security. People feel more secure being surrounded by all those things that at one point or another meant something to them. It's a safety shield. Once the shield becomes the main purpose, you lose something we all value: it's called freedom. And so, I ask you not to read this gospel story as an angry judgment story against the greed of the rich farmer, or against the church parishioner who could give more, or as a busting of the famous 1% so often cited in political arguments. Read it first as a lament about lost human freedom. What a poor man this rich farmer became! What a shame that his possessions possessed him!

I remember a commercial that they ran a few years ago. It showed a man asking a group of children in a pre-school setting, "What is better? Less or more?" And the children say, "More! It's better to have more..." think of more ice cream, more vacation, more time on the computer... That's our mainstream thinking talking to us. We can learn a lot about the underlying values of society from watching commercials. The people who run these commercials research the human heart. They know what appeals to us. But just imagine if the man in the commercial asked Jesus, "What is better? To have more or less?" I think Jesus would answer him with a 21st century version of the parable we just heard. Or imagine the man in the commercial asked Clare of Assisi, "What is better? To have more or less?" I think she would just smile at him and invite him to see some of the people she served. "Come on," she would have said, "I have some **more** to show you!" How we define "more" is the real question. And as always, Jesus invites us to believe in a paradox: the best way to experience "more" is by parting ways with the superfluous things and activities in your life. It is addition by subtraction. And yes, that is the mainstream of Jesus' teachings.

The mainstream of our thinking goes something like this... This farmer has it all figured out. He achieved what many of us would love to achieve: being able to retire and enjoy a comfortable life with no financial worries. I know there are people here who have to work beyond a comfortable retiring age, who have to deal constantly with financial worries. Your budget is notoriously tight. Every once in a while you hear stories about people who hit the check pot and are now able to lead a life seemingly free of worries. And you say: wouldn't it be great? Wouldn't it be lovely if I had forever enough money and resources? Raise your hand if the idea had no appeal to you! And yet, the parable we heard is critical of making that comfortable life your number one goal in life.

Then let us ask this: what is actually wrong with the farmer? Well, nothing that the farmer did was terribly wrong. The building of his barn, the ingenuity of his business decisions, his strategic planning, none of that was bad. The farmer's business approach was sound. The problem is hidden between the lines. It's the things he didn't do, which get him into trouble, impoverishing his soul and making him poor towards God. It's the things that aren't mentioned. Do we hear any reference to other people? Did the farmer have no family, neighbors or community? There is an indicting silence about the community in which he lived. He was apparently, sadly, disconnected from his community. Nobody rejoiced with this man. Nobody benefited from his great success. How sad!

In the history of the church there have been various movements that dealt with the money question in different ways. Some movements asked everybody to follow the model of Jesus and live in poverty and dependency, which, let's face it, will never be mainstream. Other movements emphasized that possessions are blessings from God, which is much easier to reconcile with our cultural values. But I think the real trick of becoming rich toward God goes deeper and has everything to do with sharing and blessing others with that which you have been blessed with. A member of our own church, when going to a restaurant always looks for a person who appears to be in need, quietly paying that person's bill and enjoying the reaction when they learn of the anonymous gift. What a nice practice!

The most joyous people are those who are able to share, who find enjoyment in giving and giving up so that others are also blessed. It's that simple. It's a gospel that's harder to live than to preach. But it is a gospel that comes straight out of the Jesus' play book. Try it, challenge yourself with it, let it sink into your heart and hands and check book and practices. Blessed are those who share and know that you can't take anything in the grave! Joyous are those with generous hearts. **Amen.**