

Pentecost 8, August 4, 2019

(Lk 12:13-21; Ecc 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Col 3:1-4, 8-11; Ps 49:1-12)

What a gloomy collection of readings today! In Ecclesiastes the word *meaningless* (or *vanity*, like *in vain*) appears eight times! We hear of *heavy burdens*, *hate* and *despair*; *toilsome labor* and *great misfortune*, *anxious striving* and *pain and grief*. It sounds like unrelieved misery!

The Psalm isn't much better: **no man can redeem the life of another. . . . the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough. . . . wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others. Their tombs will remain their houses forever.**

Even Jesus sounds gloomy today! If the *gospel*, the *Good News of God*, depended on today's text from Luke, I'll bet there wouldn't be many people following Jesus!

Here's a quick recap: Someone in the crowd asks Jesus to help resolve a family dispute. We're used to hearing Jesus, meek and mild, say things like, *Go in peace, your faith has saved you*, or *your sins are forgiven*, or *don't be afraid*. But today he sounds downright annoyed: **Man, who appointed me a judge over you?**

The journal *Christian Century* (July 18-25, 2001, p 16) printed a quip about today's gospel. Thinking about the man in the crowd who approached Jesus, the author imagines him years later, telling a spiritual leader the story about the "hard-hearted Rabbi Jesus."

*I used to go to the synagogue all the time, he'd say, but then one day I went to this Rabbi Jesus with a problem, and he was so incredibly uncaring, it shook my faith, it really did, and that's why I gave up on organized religion . . . ."*

The author then imagines the response of some ordained official in “organized religion”: *It’s people like that Rabbi Jesus who give religion such a bad name. One thing I can assure you, my wounded friend: There is no one even remotely resembling the Rabbi Jesus in this house of worship!*

In today’s gospel, after his abrupt exchange with the annoyed brother, Jesus tells the crowd things they’d probably rather not hear: **Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a person’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.**

*Wanting more* is both *greed* and *idolatry*. Most of the time when *churches* talk about money, it’s because they don’t have enough. When *people* talk about money, it’s often because they wish they had more. But when the *Bible* talks about money, it’s usually because someone either *has* or *wants* too much of it.

**Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.** Listen to words by writer Devonna Allison. I quote:

“Racism is, at its heart, greed—a fear that *we* will lose out if we accept *them*” (*Disciplines*, 2019, p 258, Devonna Allison) (end quote).

The ELCA and the Women of the ELCA have offered workshops and studies on racism, on the fact that it’s a very real problem in our country today. Laws have changed, but many hearts have not, and what seems to be acceptable in our leaders is diametrically opposed to the life and teachings of Jesus.

The United States, once a great nation, is building bigger barns, bigger silos, and scarier arms to showcase our wealth and “greatness.” The assets we store up or use to exclude those who are different from us could be used to help people who have literally nothing. People like the ones Jesus reached out and touched: the last, the least, the little, the lonely, the lost.

The final verse of our reading from Colossians compares **Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised**. Those words don’t convey the gut punch to us that they did in Bible times. To say *Greeks and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised* were “no longer divided” would have been unthinkable.

The major controversy among early Christians was a Jewish religious practice. The first Christians were *Jews* who’d known and followed Jesus. All male Jews were circumcised on the eighth day; that was a law of the Covenant—you couldn’t be Jewish unless you were circumcised.

In Christ these differences, and all others, count for nothing. Because of what God has done for us, we’re *invited, called, and sent* to live more fully and faithfully into the identity of *oneness with Jesus, who is all and is in all*.

And if we believe we’re “good” enough or “righteous” enough that we can be prejudiced against any group of people—like “Gentiles” or “Jews”, or blacks or Muslims or Latinos—we’d better think again. When, where, and to whom we were born is simply an *accident of birth*. Each one of us could as easily have been born in another country, or another century. Our ethnicity—our race, our cultural background—is truly a blessing, but it could just as easily have gone to someone else.

Colossians goes on to say that we've **taken off our old self . . . and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image of its Creator.** This *new life*, this *new self*, doesn't buy into the prejudices and values of the world we live in.

In holy baptism, God made each one of us his own, his precious child: *You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*

The waters of baptism *drowned* your sinful nature—the part of you that feels greedy, envious, angry, and bad. When you keep your mind on God, when you let Jesus be your companion in this life, it's so much easier to let your heart be filled with all the riches of God's creation, and with the everlasting love he died to give you.

You were *created* good! Every day God looks at you—and at every child born, every adult living—and says to himself, “That's my beloved child. I love *that one* so much I died for him. I love *that one* so much I died for her.

Thanks be to God!