

Proper 13 C
Luke 12:13-21
2010

The Self, Isolation and God

This parable always shows up in mid-summer and gives one the feeling that the powers that be are already at work on the stewardship campaign. Since churches must have stewardship campaigns, I suppose they must find biblical justification for them. But this story is more about who we are than what we should do with what we own.

Let's begin toward the end of the story with God's assessment of the rich man. God says he's a fool. Why is the man a fool? Because he doesn't know when he's going to die but acts as if he does? Is he a fool because he makes assumptions concerning things about which he knows, and can know, nothing? I'm not sure this is the case.

Perhaps the man is foolish not because he forgets his possible death, but because he ignores that which creates and sustains his life. That life consists of his interconnections with others. The man's actions, bigger barns and the harvest for himself, cut him off from community. His is an isolating response. To the extent that he ignores his interconnectedness, he is already dying. He has violated the first rule of ancient Near-Eastern peasant existence, that family and community are everything. They make you who you are. To ignore them is to become nobody.

So for the first century AD this is an amazing story. It presents a man whose assumptions, whose course of action, is almost modern. After all, what do we do today? We admire people who skillfully manage their portfolios, keep a weather eye on their pension funds and can retire early. But in ancient peasant societies the appropriate preparation for the future, after a super-successful harvest, would be to save enough for the year, maybe a bit more, but give the rest away. Why? You don't know what's going to happen, the only thing you can count on is your connection with the community around you. You don't know, for instance, whether the weather will be damp and your grain rot in storage, whether the Assyrians will come down like a wolf on the fold and requisition everything you have in your barns. Remember the story from Judges in which Gideon is threshing grain on the floor of the wine press because he is afraid that the Midianite troops will come and confiscate the harvest? (Judges 6:1-11) This kind of thing went on in the ancient world all the time. Your neighbors could help you survive the bad times, best use surplus to cement your connections with them.

Now we have Wall Street, and it wasn't too long ago that we saw accumulated wealth unexpectedly whisked out from underneath people. The difference between ourselves and those ancient Near Easterners is that we did not expect the Midianites and they did.

So the man is a fool not because he forgets his mortality, but because he doesn't use his resources to build and support his community. Death precludes the development of community and death is appropriate for him because, by his decision to isolate himself, he has already chosen death. At this point, I really should stop and say that's enough for moderns to reflect on. What does this mean? Does not the loss of a sense of community as our primary responsibility speak to the loss, pain and anxiety we experience in our lives and in our culture?

But I'm not going to let you off the hook with a single idea. This passage implies a few other things worth looking at: for instance, that the Christian vision of the role of the individual in society and that of the modern west are distinct. It says something, I think, about the role of the church in society: The church cannot help but be counter-cultural. I don't think we can avoid it. So I find myself looking askance at all attempts to say, "In order to get the church to work, we need to package or present the church in ways that are culturally acceptable." The Christian vision of community can never be understood much less accepted as long as our thought is based on modern Western assumptions. Our sense of the primary importance of the individual forbids it.

Let me put it this way. Moderately aged people, such as myself, remember from the 1960's a gentleman, Marshall McLuhan, not much heard from now, but then constantly referred to. His signature statement was, "The medium is the message." I don't completely accept that, but there is a point to it. If modernity becomes the medium the church uses to state its message, then we need to be exceedingly careful that it doesn't become the message itself – just as all previous statements of the Christian message have had to treat culture gingerly for the same reason.

We cannot assume that what the culture values as superior and what God values as superior are identical. That's a simple message, except in execution. It's so easy to respond, "Of course we don't do that." Yet we do. I think it is what we do. In this case, we value the isolated hero, the loner, who overcomes all obstacles. Sometimes we even model God on this pattern, understanding him as the super hero of super heroes.

Let's go back to Jesus's wealthy, successful farmer. Ancient Palestinian peasants would have been horrified by this man's actions, not only because he has forgotten his dependence on community and rejected his opportunity to contribute to it, but also because he has forgotten that God is essential to and always present in community. Now this is a bit tricky. We tend to think of God in two ways: 1) as transcendent and therefore outside community and 2) as present in and to the individual. One begins to pick this up in the Reformation and some forms of pre-Reformation Roman piety in which the relation between the individual and God becomes the primary reality. To a large extent, we're still there.

Forgetting the cohesion of the human community and forgetting of the presence of God would, in the minds of first century people, go together. God is the foundation of the community and constantly present in it. There's no such thing as God over here, to whom we can relate on our right hand, and the human community on over here to which we can relate separately and on the left. That's impossible. One relates to God through the human community and one relates to the human community, and this is a bit harder for us to remember, through God. To lose God is, ultimately, to lose our humanity.

The sacramental nature of our worship says that in our relation to God there is usually some kind of mediator. There is the mediator of bread and wine in what we do today. There is the mediation of this community. We do communion together. I cannot theologically, legally, spiritually, say Eucharist alone. Were I to do so, it would be an imitation of liturgical action, but not an act of worship. Again, because of our culture, because of our modernity, we tend to underestimate the importance human interconnections to our worship and spirituality.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, I had a chance to chat with a couple of hermits – formal, religious hermits, people who have been authorized to live solitary lives. There used to be an official hermit in this diocese, most people don't know that. Their attitude was interesting: the more one is alone, the more one becomes aware of connection with others. Physical aloneness heightens knowledge of connection. It makes one more aware of the meaning of absence.

People who cannot deal with the meaning of absence tend to reject aloneness. They reject the life of the hermit and make use of all forms of institutional connection people provide for themselves. In this welter of forms, their lack of contact with their true inner isolation can remain masked from them and, frequently, from the world.

This, I think, is revealing. We cast our religion in terms of a person's relationship with God when, in fact, the communal relation with God is, if I may use a word technically, ontologically the foundation. So there's another thing to think about: The balance of individuality and community, and not just their balance, but the fact that they are an interdependent unity. It's not just that the man in today's gospel is greedy. That ancient successful farmer had an incorrect, a mistaken ontology. How one understands the world is important to one's relation with God. Although I heartily disapprove of burning people at the stake for it, I do think that the idea that incorrect belief is irrelevant is foolish. It is foolish also to assume that we know what correct belief is. But to say that to get it wrong is irrelevant does not wash either.

So that's a little bit about what I think is at stake in this story.

Now, final point, and something quite different. The collects are frequently good at giving us the framework for approaching the lessons of the day. So I want to call your attention to one phrase in the collect of the day and then call it quits.

We ask God to cleanse and defend the church because it cannot continue in safety without God's help. Then we say, "Protect and govern it always by your goodness." We are to be protected and governed by goodness, not by power. Or, if we are to be protected and governed by power, it is and can be only by the power of goodness. It cannot be the power of coercion or punishment. That sets the framework.

The church is to be protected and governed by the goodness of God. I would submit to you that implies a level of relationship between the church and God which is far broader and more subtle than assuming that the proper job of the Christian is to ask God to tweak the fabric of the universe so that it works now where it didn't work before. To be governed by goodness, to me, implies reciprocity, it implies awareness, it implies a sometimes slow and indirect mode of work, and it can imply a rejection of anything that can be understood as heavy handed coercion. To put it in a slightly different way, what this collect does is to start to correct a common but disastrous opinion: that God works by tweaking the fabric of things when it has gone wrong.

So, that's the last point. Sorry, I've given you far more problems than answers. But that's the way Christianity works.