

Possessions
Palisades, August 5, 2007
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I love the parables! And I love them for a variety of reasons. First, they are stories, and I love stories and story-telling. Jesus was a master storyteller. He captured the listener's attention both with vivid imagery and with the underlying messages.

All of the parables are riddles of sorts. Some are easier to understand than others. The one we just listened to is quite clear. It's also a bit like an onion. The primary message is evident, but as we look at the story and peel it away we find other messages under each layer.

Parables "speak" to us where we are, and occasionally one will punch us right in the face with its timely relevance. It's kind of like preachers' sermons. Every now and then at the end of a Sunday service someone will shake my hand or give me a hug and say something like, "Thank you so much for your message. Thus-and-so is happening in my life right now, and it seemed that your message was specifically for me." Or, "We really needed to hear that in our church." Or something similar.

I don't know how or why that happens, but it does. And it doesn't just happen in church and with sermons, does it? We can meet an acquaintance in the grocery store and during a casual conversation in Aisle 3 something one or the other of us says strikes a chord. Something is said that relates directly to something we are experiencing in our life.

Well, that being said, let me tell you that this Parable of the Rich Fool spoke to me - personally - this week! This was the week that Max and I picked up our new car!

It's a Honda Odyssey Touring Minivan. And it's a beauty. There are so many bells and whistles in this vehicle that I doubt we will ever fully understand all it can do.

It also cost *twice* what our house cost when it was built in 1964! Oh, I know all the arguments about inflation, but in the face of the crying needs of a broken world, this vehicle almost feels obscene! Did we need a different automobile for transportation? Yes. Our old car was on its last legs. Did we need a *new* car? No. A good used car would

have worked. Did we need to go for the top of the line in Honda Minivans? No.

Will we still enjoy it? You bet! But there is still a message for us that we mustn't miss as we are programming our satellite radio or fiddling with our global navigation system. The money we spent on this car *could* have been less...and the difference given to peoples in need. And if I drop dead later today....well, then what? Max is unable to drive because of a medical condition. The car would be sold, or given to one of our grown children.....but the depreciation that occurred at the very moment that we drove out of the dealer's lot represents a whole lot that *could* have been spent more wisely.

Possessions! I think in retrospect that I should have just titled this sermon "Stuff!" We have so much "stuff!" We have this insatiable appetite for "stuff." And often we have to sell, give away, or throw out "stuff" so we will have room for the new "stuff" that we are about to buy.

Oh, my friends...I know that the Sandmeiers are not alone. We are *all* so far removed from the Kingdom of which Jesus taught, aren't we?

Three weeks ago I took a week-long course on the gospel of Mark at the Maryknoll Institute over in Ossining. It was an incredibly rich graduate level course taught by a Presbyterian minister who lived for over 40 years in the Middle East, researching, writing and teaching in seminaries and other institutions in Beirut and Jerusalem.

But the experience was also rich in several other ways. There were 36 in the class. Three of us were Presbyterians. Four were Episcopalians. Four were retired Catholic priests and the remainder were nuns; the majority of them Maryknoll nuns who had among them nearly 1000 years of mission work around the world. We studied and learned together, we enjoyed break time together, and we shared our mid-day meal together in the convent's main dining hall.

Oh yes, and we worshiped together at the start of each morning. In fact, David Harkness, who is Pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Irvington, and I were invited and led worship one morning.

It was in the worship and meal settings that David and I experienced the dedicated contemplative and mission focus of these remarkable

sisters. They have devoted their lives in often quite dangerous places to serving those in need both of the Word of God and of health care or education. Our new Honda Odyssey is about as far from their personal needs or interests as it could be. I admit that while I would make a terrible nun, I admired and somewhat coveted their grace.

You know those MasterCard commercials that end with the word *priceless*? They go something like this: “Two tickets to Paris – \$3,000; Dinner with a view of the Eiffel Tower – \$400; That diamond ring she always wanted – \$5,000; Showing your wife how much all the years have really meant – priceless.” Or how about: “Two tickets to the home opener – \$150; Two hot dogs, a big pretzel, and a baseball signed by his favorite player – \$85; Sharing a whole afternoon with your kid – priceless.”

I was thinking about these commercials in relationship with our parable this morning because they seem to place our spending in perspective. Life is about relationships, it is about love, it is about raising our kids. Of course these MasterCard ads tell us that purchasing provides the means to those ends. They say, money does not buy happiness, but it sure can facilitate the deal, right? I mean, who says that the abundance of our possessions isn't what life is all about?

Well, actually – Jesus does.

Jesus obviously never had a MasterCard.

Jesus says, “For one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”. The “not” is correct. It does sound like something Jesus would say. It's right here in the Bible. Yet, as we live in a society where the abundance of possessions is so obviously the object of our living; as I do a quick inventory of all that “stuff” that I possess – there is more than a little disconnect.

When a man approaches Jesus at the beginning of today's Gospel reading, it is not because he recognizes a precious moment in his life. In fact, he brings a complaint against his brother. Dad is apparently dead and all the holdings have most likely gone to the older brother. That was the way it worked in Jesus' day. The younger brother here wishes to dissolve his relationship with the family, get what is coming to him, and hit the road. If this were one of those MasterCard ads it would go like this: “Making a life for yourself –

half the estate; Getting rid of your older brother – priceless.” Jesus’ response is a refusal to get involved. Then he turns to the crowd and tells them a parable about greed where the main character is shown to be a fool.

What makes this farmer a fool? If we’re honest, we would have to admit that the man in the parable appears to be a perfectly reasonable sort of guy. Look: An already prosperous, even rich man sees the abundance of this year’s crop. He planted the seeds. He saw them come up. Now, as he calculates a bumper crop, he realizes that he has too little storage. Not enough grain bins on the farm. Further, he apparently figures that this crop will be enough to retire on, observing that now he can eat, drink, and be happy.

Foolish? Isn’t this what we all are or were working for at some level? Isn’t this the path to security and happiness we are focused on for most of a lifetime? This guy could be one of the MasterCard ads: “Seed for a good crop – 3,000 denari; Storage for a bumper crop – a bunch more denari; Being able to eat, drink, and be merry – priceless.”

The turn in this parable comes as God comes to the man, who is just now poised to live the life he has been chasing, and says: “This very night your life is being demanded of you.” Death speaks and the abundance is washed away. Death comes and the prosperity is destroyed. Who now will have this abundance? Well, surely not the man who wanted to hold on to it all. The parable gives no hint of a family – in fact the preponderance of words like “I,” “mine,” and “me” suggest a man and his money alone. Some scholars suggest that if this man had no heirs, his abundance would go to the poor. If that were the case, the tragedy is that he could have lived in that kingdom while he was alive; he could have given the excess to the poor, made the world a little more like the kingdom of God, and in the process, robbed death of its power to rob him. That is what makes him a fool in Jesus’ eyes. Jesus knows how the story of the rich and poor ends – neither exist anymore. This man lived as if his abundance was eternal. It was a fool’s game.

It is a fool's game to believe that we are so in control of the future that we can purchase it for ourselves. It is a fool's game to believe that we can demonstrate our love for others through what we buy and possess. It is a fool's game to believe that what we possess can stand against death.

I think Jesus wanted the man who approached him to go home and make peace with his brother, because brotherhood lasts into the reign of God eternally and inheritances do not.

Shakespeare said it in *Measure for Measure*. “If thou art rich, thou art poor, for like an ass whose back with ingots bows, thou bearest thy heavy riches but a journey, and death unloads thee.”

Jesus says to us: “Take care! Be on your guard . . . for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”. Jesus' word to us is this:

Setting you free from your possessions and making you worthy to live in the kingdom of God – the price I paid on the cross;

Getting to live free of death's strong word and in the kingdom before it comes – priceless;

Living a life free of the need to always produce a good crop in a world where bad crops happen all the time – priceless;

Living a life free of worrying about yourself so you can tend to others in a way that foreshadows how the reign of God really works – priceless;

Living a life that is rooted in the eternal nature of God so deeply that death cannot erase all that you have worked for – priceless;

Living life in a way that robs death of the power to have the last word – priceless.

This parable speaks this morning directly to me. How does it speak to you?

Priceless.

Amen.