

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost VIII

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How sweetly solemn is this awful place! Where all of earth fades out and vanishes, I cannot fear while I behold Thy face, My help, my friend, the Lord my righteousness. Amen.

When I was in high school my friends and I shared novels. And one of the popular novels was by Mario Puzzo “Fools Die.” In the book Mario makes the claim that “Virtue is its own reward and fools are they who die.” Fools die. I wonder. Peter Tosh-a Jamaican reggae sensation in one of his songs-Fools Die For Want Of Wisdom, quotes the book of Proverbs to help his listeners understand the damaging effect of wanton desiring of material possession to the detriment of our inner peace. Fools die.

Pre-reformation Christianity taught us purgatory- a place where souls of the deceased languished until they were cleansed enough to proceed onward to heaven. The deficiency with this teaching was the burden of penance for the deceased was unduly placed on the living. The incentive was that people like the cheating brother and the rich fool, you and me could do whatever we wanted and then expect someone to pay the penance. In a sense, we are all in a purgatory of sorts-because I like to look at purgatory, not as a holding place for the souls of the deceased, but the playground of the living.

Playing in purgatory means that we get the chance to learn that there are no insignificant actions or words. Our actions and words-spoken or unspoken, have consequences. And some of the consequences can be horrific. Just think about the mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton. Yet we believe we are insulated from the horror of gun violence. You don't have to wait till you become a victim to speak out. It might be too late. Actions have consequences that's why this poor fella would not have sought help from Jesus in his quarrel with his brother. Regardless of how big or small the inheritance may have been, he felt aggrieved by his brother. He recognized his own limitations in seeking redress, and found in Jesus an honest arbiter.

This story points, not only to a brother's greed, our greed and blatant indifference but it is also about a kind of human depravity that upends genuine relationships. This story points to the premium we place on material wealth over relationships with others.

Learn this, many gods do not fill a basket. And the more gods you have will not fill your basket. There's a story about a notorious student at my boarding school who went off campus without permission. Unfortunately for him, the headmaster saw him and brought him to campus. He took him to his office and in the course of scolding him, he told the boy, "your cup is full today." The boy's response was "Sir, it is leaking." The point the boy sought to make was that in so far as the cup is leaking, it can never be full. In so far as a basket leaks, you cannot fill it with as many gods. In so far as our time here is limited and isn't determined by us, in so far as we have absolutely no control over anything, no number of gods can fill up our leaking baskets. It is only a fool who believes otherwise and so places his hope in the material. Fools die.

There is always the human desire for more-remember Oliver Twist? Oliver asks for more. We like more because we live with the fear of having less. Having more assures us of some level of comfort and security. According to Ecclesiastics, we chase after more and even take what doesn't belong to us for the sake of having more. There's this novel concept- which is the change of being- which means that we do not remain the same forever. If we do not remain the same forever, why repose your hope in material wealth? In fact, the request to Jesus by the brother actually proves the point in Ecclesiastics that we struggle for more without knowing who or what will happen to all that we gathered. And that is vanity.

More isn't necessarily a bad thing, but how we make the more, what we do with the more and the place of the more in our lives is the problem. When I was in Philadelphia I served as a Hospice Chaplain. One day a patient came on service. She had no family. In my conversation with her attorney, I learned that she was originally from upstate New York. She came to Temple University for undergrad, stayed for graduate school, got her PhD and then got a job as a professor at Temple. She spent all her life at Temple chasing as many gods to fill her basket. In the end, it was a total stranger, a lawyer, who was making life and death decisions on her behalf. What happened to the family she left behind in New York? What happened between the time she left New York and the

day she passed? I wonder. Something happened along the way that caused her to lose all the important relationships in her formative years. I need you to reflect with me on this. Which fraction of our king or queen size bed do we occupy in our sleep? I have been to many hospitals, but I am yet to visit a hospital with a queen size or a king size bed. Not that it isn't necessary, it is not needful.

In the coming weeks many will donate items for our annual flea market. There will be lots of items-both new and old for sale. The cause is great because we are affirming our mutuality and reciprocity with one another and to those in need.

If you think about it, some of the old items were stuff we once thought we needed to have, part of our craving for more. But overtime we have found a lesser need for them, we have embraced the old maxim of purgation being the essence of self-simplification.

The sad reality of the parable is the gods we invent for ourselves cannot and do not satisfy us, and so we always have to seek new ones to fill up those we've lost. Like the rich man, we make a god of anything. If there is ever a missing link between animals and our perfect humanity, that missing link is the time when we choose to be so content with the mirage of self-sufficiency, it is the time when we choose to believe the gods we have invented, it is the time when we assume we own ourselves, when we convince ourselves that we have many things stored up and so we can eat, drink and be merry, when we think we are the captain of our own ships, master of our own souls and that our lives are in our own hands, after all, we have our own gods-fools die. As tempting as being our own masters may be, our challenge is always to refuse to be the missing link between animals and our perfect humanity.

The problem for the rich man was becoming the missing link between an animal and his perfect humanity. He thought he owned himself or his soul, or at least the goods that he has gathered guaranteed self-sufficiency. But you know the liberating fact about believing in God is that it frees us from believing in anything else-even ourselves. For all things, except God, is provisional. That is why Ecclesiastics chooses to call them vanity-meaning they are temporary.

At every point in our lives, we are presented with an opportunity to either reflect our true humanity or the primal instinct which is often so consumed with the self that nothing else matters

but the self. Politics is also about the self, and unfortunately, our politics has become one of demeaning people and the institutions we have all built together. Yes, politics is about the self-but we cannot go about it like the cheating brother or the rich fool. The best of us calls for more than insults and denigration. The best of us seeks to lift up, hold up, reach out, embrace and mend and not to kill innocent people whose only crime was to go out and shop.

Paul therefore encourages us to set our minds on things that are above, for that is the only way we can disentangle ourselves from being consumed with ourselves.

To recognize that we have a perfect example in a Jesus who reflects our true humanity, and to be willing to make the journey to a humanity radiant with a kind of attitude that celebrates the uniqueness of each person, and more importantly, recognizes its own limitations.

To literally lift my head and look up, is to admit my own inadequacy and to acknowledge that the human will feels liberated when we accept the consequences of wrong choices and refuse to be fools who die.

At the playground of purgatory, hope is given a new life because we can face the truth about ourselves without any despair. When we realize that there is a love so strong that we are able to remember everything we are and have done without lying, editing or despairing, we would once more begin to live in hope. It is this desire to live in hope that will free us to begin the task of inner evolution, the task of refusing to be the fools who die. Amen.