

Fr. Joseph Neiman
August 5, 2007
Proper 13-C
Ecclesiastes 1:12-14; 2:18-23
Colossians 3:5-17
Luke 12:13-21

Homily:

Jesus said: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15)

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (Lk 12:13), a man asks Jesus, Luke tells us. The request was not totally out of place, for indeed rabbis, as wise elders of the Jewish community, would be asked to settle disputes. In a way, the man in the crowd was complimenting Jesus.

Deacon Judi, my wife, was a hospice chaplain for 15 years, and she can tell you many stories about inheritances, how members of the family argue in front of the dying person or actually start taking things before the person has died.

Brian Bell, in a book called *Lessons in Lifemanship*, says: "One of the ugliest displays of human behavior takes place when heirs start fighting over an estate. Old sibling rivalries and antagonisms can erupt, and greed enters the picture. Perhaps spouses of the heirs join the fray, and other in-laws. Finally, the trouble starts if they all begin to hire lawyers, and one attorney says, "Don't let them get away with that. We can beat them in court."

Sadly, when fighting over a will, families frequently get split apart for life, and wounds are inflicted that never heal. What may start as an apparent minor disagreement gets blown up, and people polarize."

He goes on to say: "Two of the families we knew well when we were young split apart, and it was tragic to watch. In one case, a father left a disproportionate amount to one daughter who, in his opinion, needed financial support more than the two other siblings, but these two felt the arrangement was too disproportionate and unfair. So they contested the will, and after a long, drawn-out, vitriolic controversy in which alienation developed and legal fees mounted, they all lost.

In another case, a son-in-law was running the family wholesale hardware business when his wife and three other sisters inherited the family estate which consisted largely of the business itself. The division was named as being equal for the four siblings, but the son-in-law, in complicity with his wife, maneuvered the situation so that he and his family ended up with the lion's share. This feud was stimulated by in-laws, and the wounds are still unhealed.

Bryan Bell is describing contemporary situations he knew, but each of us can probably tell similar stories, and we all were exposed – if you listened – to the antics of Playboy model and actress Anna Nicole Smith after the death of her husband and subsequently after her own death as well. Smith married J. Howard Marshall, a Texas oil baron, after they met at a Houston strip club where she was performing. She was 26, he was 89. After 14 months of marriage, he died but not before Smith says he promised her half of his fortune. His will left his estate, estimated to be worth \$500 million, to two of his sons. Smith went to court to contest the will (People magazine).

In Jewish tradition, which stands behind the question in today's Gospel, the elder son in the family would receive two thirds of the father's possessions in order to keep the family holdings intact. The man asking Jesus to intervene may have been the younger son who wanted an equal portion.

According to Luke, Jesus tells the man: "Take care; be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15).

What a powerful statement! In our cultural and religious battles over war, drugs, abortion, homosexuality and the like, we want to be able to quote the Bible, and particularly the teachings of Jesus, to back up our points of view. Seldom do we quote that which was a strong part of the teachings of Jesus; namely the addiction to wealth.

The great sin disease here in North America is the reality that we are possessed by our possessions. They own us. Like the man in the parable we just heard, we gather more and more things, build larger places to store them, insure them in case of theft or fire, and sometimes even hire guards to protect them. Yet preachers are not supposed to talk about money in Church. It might upset people, and they might not come back. Money, possessions – these are considered very private matters.

Thomas Merton has a marvelous metaphor about our sin disease in North America. He says we wrap possessions around us like bandages around an invisible mummy. What an instructive image. Ask any young person: is a person with lots of money or things more important than someone who has little or nothing? You know the answer you will likely get!

Having things, lots of them - and particularly having the “right” things is so much a part of our North American identity that we can hardly imagine living without them. And yet as both the lesson from Ecclesiastes and from Luke tells us this morning, we are only temporary custodians or stewards of the things we have. You never see a U-Haul trailer attached to a hearse! Now there is nothing wrong with careful planning and management of one’s resources as far as their material use within one’s life span, but what about the abundance?

The man in the parable we heard from Jesus in Luke’s Gospel today had land that “produced abundantly.” He had much more than he needed. So what about the abundance? He decided to hoard it, to build bigger barns and sheds to house it and so he could set back and take pleasure in knowing that he had so much wealth. How much do we hoard? I don’t know about you, but I am spending a lot of time in retirement just getting rid of stuff I have accumulated over many years!

One of our American bishops was taking part in an Anglican conference in Asia, and he and his wife shared stories with the local bishop and his family. Among the exchanges, our bishop showed his host a picture of their home here in the United States. The Asian bishop asked: how many families live there? Our bishop had to answer that only he and his wife lived in that abundant house.

Speaking of inheritances, on page 445 of the Book of Common Prayer we read the following mandate for clergy:

“The Minister of the Congregations is directed to instruct the people, from time to time, about the duty of Christian parents to make prudent provision for the well-being of their families, and of all persons to make wills, while they are in health, arranging for the disposal of their temporal goods, not neglecting, if they are able, to leave bequests for religious and charitable uses” (BCP, p. 445).

So you see, if a priest is to be faithful to the Gospel and to the instructions from the Book of Common Prayer, he or she has to preach on occasion about possessions, and today is one of those occasions.

Since we are possessed by our possessions, one of the remedies which the good Lord offers us to set us free is tithing, giving ten percent off the top of our resources to the mission and ministry of Christ in the world today. When we hear this, we recoil and wonder if it is really possible to do so. Ten percent given to the Lord? In fact the good Lord wants all of our possessions used as the Holy Spirit would direct.

Paul, writing to the Colossians on the Turkey peninsula, tells them: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

For your homework this week, I would ask you to do the following three things:

First: look around you when you get home at the abundance of things you have. Do you give thanks to God in your prayers for them and for the gifts and talents you have been given which enable you to acquire them, or for the inheritance you received which gave them to you? Be thankful.

Second: do you have a will? If not, start planning this week to take the necessary steps to set up one. If you do, review it to see if you have make provisions for religious and charitable recipients, such as your Church. And by the way, leave a percentage rather than a specific amount as most of us vastly underestimate the value of our estate.

Third: what can you do now, this week and beyond, to share from the abundance you have with those who are in need? What is so precious among your possessions that you cannot go without? How attached are you to what you own, or does it own you?

Jesus said: "Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15).

God bless you and keep you this day and always, and remember that the good Lord does indeed love you more than you can ask for or even imagine.