

“More Than You Might Think”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
10th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13 – 1 August 2010
Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

People expected Jesus to help solve their disputes. He knew the Law as well or better than anybody else. That’s why they called him “rabbi,” translated into English as “teacher.” In this case, a man wants his brother to split the inheritance with him, but the Law clearly stipulated that a double-portion went to the elder brother. Younger brother hoped for an exception to this rule. Jesus could have rendered judgment quickly, easily, and irrefutably. Yet he refused the role. Apparently, Jesus felt like he had more important things to do.

This led into a parable about a rich man, whose lands yielded a bumper crop. The guy was excited and embarked on an ambitious construction project to house the huge surplus, a perfectly natural and responsible thing to do. The rich man took great comfort in the thought that his worries were over. “I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.”

Then Jesus inserts a twist into the parable. The grandiose plans of permanent financial security will last until sunset. Before the next sunrise, our wealthy land owner will be dead, and as the old saying goes, “You can’t take it with you.”

Three things intrigue me about this story. First, Jesus refuses to do the work people expected a rabbi to do. Second, what the rich man should have said, but didn’t. Third, what the rich man said, and to whom he said it.

First, Jesus declined to assume the role people thought he ought to fill. Some might perceive this as a dereliction of duty. Certainly, the man bringing suit against his older brother felt this way. But we do the same thing, when we ask Jesus to fill a role that he has no time for

or interest in filling. How often do we invoke Jesus to settle our disputes? How often do we ask Jesus to sit as judge in our conflicts?

In the political arena, this is sadly common, and even worse, a number of people from across the political spectrum feel like they already know what Jesus thinks. Take a topic, any topic: war, capital punishment, the economy, the environment. People appeal to Jesus to support their position, but his response to the younger brother suggests that Jesus may not be interested. It isn't that Jesus doesn't care, but that his purposes transcend the hot-button issues that keep so many people agitated.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus makes plain that his central purpose is to reconcile people with God, to introduce a new Kingdom distinguished by forgiveness and peace. The particulars of a specific controversy do not obsess Jesus in the way that these arguments frequently become a fixation for us. The question for Jesus seems to be, "What is the course that exercises forgiveness and leads to peace and reconciliation?" Jesus did not come to settle our petty squabbles or indulge our grasping for power. He came to replace that behavior with an entirely different way of looking at things, an entirely different way of living, focused and grounded in love – unselfish, non-anxious love. We cannot use Jesus to leverage our preferences. He will have none of it, and the sooner we learn that and take it to heart, the sooner we might exit the maelstrom of conflict that seems a feature of everyday life in our world.

Second, the rich man's silence perplexes me. He has plenty to say about his good fortune and how he plans to preserve it, but not a single syllable is offered up in thanksgiving to God. The rich man did not make the sun shine or the clouds pour forth rain at the right time in the right proportion. The rich man may have fertilized the soil and tended the crop, but he could not have created the soil in all its natural fertility, nor did he create seed, a miracle of growth and

bounty. The rich man, in his delirious joy over the bumper crop, forgot – distracted by his aspirations – he forgot to thank God.

This is easy to do, so we cannot judge the rich man of the parable. We all take so much for granted, forgetting in the business of everyday life that every breathe we take, every morsel we eat, every drink of water, every ray of life-giving sunshine: it's all a gift from God. We are delighted when all these things come together to provide us with what we want, and disconcerted when things don't come together, and we suffer. But in both bad times and good, we are meant to thank God for the possibility, the opportunity, the life that only God can offer.

When we remember to praise God, we avoid the type of foolish sentiments expressed by the rich man in his statement, "I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years." What makes this statement foolish is that the rich man addressed this thought to his Soul. Now it's important to talk to your Soul, and even more important to listen, but a person's Soul cannot feed off of grain or the livestock fattened from it or the gold and silver exchanged for it. To the soul, the rich man's statement is irrelevant. It is almost as if he had reduced his soul to an organ of acquisition, preservation, and consumption – a sad state for a Soul to be in.

What would have fed the rich man's soul? "I rejoice for God who provides such abundance!" That's a soul-feeding statement. "I seek God's guidance about how God desires me to handle this remarkable gift!" That's a soul-feeding statement. But "I won the lottery," or "My insider information will make me a millionaire," those types of statements are like telling your child, "Hey, honey, look! Dirt and tree bark for breakfast. Yum-yum!"

What nourishes a soul is a relationship with the living God, a relationship naturally typified by humble gratitude and a burning curiosity to know how God wants to bless others with who we are and what we have.

Unfortunately, it's very popular in Christian circles to force Jesus into a role that starves the soul. Too many look to Jesus as judge, or presume to speak on his behalf in order to win arguments. Too many follow the false teaching of the "prosperity gospel," that claims the faithful can ask for whatever they wish, in terms of wealth, and it will be granted. These are pagan ways of looking at Jesus, as if he were one of the gods of old, who if sufficiently flattered or bribed will pour out whatever the worshipper desires. This is based in a misunderstanding of who God is and who we are in relation to God. Following Jesus is not about wish-fulfillment. It goes far beyond that. Following Jesus is about being filled to overflowing with grace that helps us embrace God's desire as our desire, cost what it will.

Because following Jesus does come at a cost. Salvation is free. Love is free. But following Jesus costs our lives. As Paul so eloquently put it in his Letter to the Colossians, those who follow Jesus faithfully die to a life of grasping and fighting for passing pleasures and fleeting victories. We trade that in so that we might truly live a life worth living. A life that stills contains conflict, yes, but with the hope that forgiveness will eventually allow peace to prevail. A life that stills strives to meet basic needs, yes, but with faith in God's goodness to provide, rather than depending upon merely our own efforts.

This is not to say that those who follow Jesus stop trying. It's just that what we strive for changes. Instead of settling scores, we take a look at the rules, to see if they're fair – not just for us, but for everybody. We make sure the playing field is as level as possible in an imperfect world, where there are powerful people invested in keeping that field tilted as much as possible

in their favor. It means that we try hard to make a good living, but not at the expense of taking from others unfairly, and that we recognize our efforts as an expression of God's creativity and power, because we remember that we are creatures created in the image of God. As Paul wrote, "you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

Following Jesus is not a part of life. It is life transformed, filling shameful silences with praise and thanksgiving. It is life that nourishes the soul. It is life that accepts Jesus for who he is, rather than attempting to place him in roles that do not suit the Christ who came for the sake of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace. Amen.