



Grace Lutheran Church
July 31, 2022: 8th Sunday after Pentecost
“The Measure of True Wealth”

The Christian life is most faithfully viewed from the perspective of the cross. We have all been crucified with Christ, buried with him, as Paul says, by baptism into death so that we too may be raised as new persons in Christ. This death, this

drowning of our old sinful selves, is not just a one-off but a daily dying and rising. “When you wash your face,” said Martin Luther said of that daily ritual, “remember your baptism.”

As Christians we must also contend with the reality of earthly death. The fact is that every day of life also brings us one day closer to our death. When I was chatting with my cousin Janie on Friday I mentioned that this might be a theme of today’s sermon. “Oh boy, they are going to love that,” she said. “And by the way, they already know – they don’t need you to tell them.”

But when does this realization dawn? At 55, 65? I remember having the impression even five years ago that endless time stretched before me to get it all together. Just read more, pray more, and you’ll figure it out. Not so anymore. What time do I have? 70 years, perhaps 80, as the psalmist says? Or maybe even 90, given that 90 is the new 80? This way of thinking is not fatalistic, it’s just how life on earth works. At least we have the consciousness to ponder it, unlike the ant I was sweeping off the table who I truly did not mean to crush to a pulp.

Today’s gospel is about developing an awareness of the finite span of our life and what we do with that awareness. Here we meet a man who does not realize that his life is about to be over. Rich in things, he believes endless time stretches before him to admire the products of his wealth and to eat, drink and be merry.

If you knew your life was about to be taken from you, what would you be admiring as you looked back? Your nest egg? Your money market fund? The grain you have stored up in barns and more barns, overflowing with abundance simply so that you can add to them?

But there is much more than materialism at stake in today’s gospel. We get the clue right at the beginning: “Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

This demand tells us the speaker is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his brother on the altar of financial gain. For whatever reason, he has been treated unjustly or cut out of the will. But to bring in an arbitrator to force a settlement, as he’s trying to get Jesus to do, would likely cause a rift between the brothers that could extend to the entire family and fester for generations. Most of us probably have something like this somewhere on the family tree. On mine, long ago one of my great aunts accused her sister’s son of stealing something from her home. He didn’t do it, the sister said. Yes he did, she insisted. They never spoke again. Decades passed and then they died, but the rift lives on. I am not that those two branches of the family have communicated since.

Jesus' response to the speaker's demand is to tell this parable. The rich man cares only about himself. We hear him speak of *my* barns, *my* grain, *my* goods, and even *my* soul – when as we know everything including our soul really belongs to God. What a lonely existence it must have been. He has no community that we are aware of, no wife, no children. All he has for conversation is his own soul. Imagine his shock when God interrupts his reverie to call him out as a fool and inform him that his time is up. No chance now to find a wife and have children. No chance now to repair broken relationships. No chance to reconnect with old friends or make new ones. Game over.

The point of the parable in light of its context is: Would you rather have money, or a sibling? What is your true wealth? If we follow Jesus through Luke, we see what he considered *his* wealth to be—the people around him. His entire portfolio, his 401k, was his group of friends. Those who followed him, those who stood by him at the cross, those who attended to his lifeless body, those who carried on his mission, finally convinced of the truth of all he had been telling them.

What then should we be doing with all that God has given us? Making friends, forging relationships. On our deathbed we are not going to be checking our bank balance. We want people to come and stand beside us and sing. We want our entire baptismal family, those who together have been crucified with Christ, to come and surround us like a great cloud of witnesses.

This got me thinking. Who will be in my cloud?

- My husband, who is truly a Renaissance man, equally fluent in sports, cinema and Shakespeare;
- Our children and their spouses, all brimming hope and a captivating zest for life;
- My brother, who finds perfect satisfaction making his daily rounds picking up trash in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles;
- The my first boyfriend, who got me into music criticism and who boldly took on the Atlanta Symphony and by extension the entire good-old-boy network that still runs Atlanta, only to be banished to the obituary pages of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution;
- The brilliant art collector who transitioned from priceless antiquities to championing impoverished self-taught Black artists of the Deep South, who mortgaged his life to produce books documenting their work of mind-boggling content and beauty and who was finally crushed by the museum establishment that saw him as a mortal threat;
- Friends from my graduate school days in Boston, friends from Ohio, friends from Wisconsin...and now I have all of you.

Today's gospel is a precious reminder that people are our true wealth. The people in your family. The people you know. The friends you have made. Those who, on your deathbed, are gathered around you, laughing and crying, telling stories, singing you across the river into Jesus' arms.

But you don't have to wait until then. Anytime you choose, you can turn to God, lift your hands in gratitude and say: "Just LOOK at who I got to be with!" And there are more to come.

Amen.