

## “We’re Only Passing Through”

- I. Introduction: Just like Jesus, isn't it? We're having a festive homecoming here at the Church of the Ascension. We're welcoming all of our guests, and we're planning a big feast. And our most honored guest, Jesus Christ, is talking about money and greed. Actually, this is one of the things I most admire about Jesus: he doesn't allow himself to be contained or constrained by our human focus in the moment. I believe that our Lord knows what we need to hear and what we need to learn and then he begins to teach us. Now on one level Jesus is certainly teaching us about money and greed this morning. There are over 2,000 verses in the Bible about money and 16 of Jesus' 38 parables are about wealth and possessions.

But, on another level, I also hear Jesus teaching us about homecoming. I recently heard a story about a tourist from America who once paid a visit to a renowned Polish rabbi. He was astonished to see that the rabbi's house was only a simple room filled with books, and it had in it only a table and a bench. "Rabbi," asked the tourist, "where is your furniture?" "Where is yours?" said the rabbi in return. "Mine?" questioned the puzzled American. "But I'm only passing through." "So," said the rabbi, "am I." And, we're all only passing through. Our home is elsewhere.

- II. My brothers and sisters in Christ, this morning we're celebrating fifty years of ministry in this wonderful place called The Church of the Ascension. Our theme is "Fifty Years and Forward," and our celebration is meant to include those who have come before us, those who are here now, and those who will be here in the future. Our celebration together today is grand, but it is only a foretaste, a hint, of the celebration we can look forward to when we go to our heavenly home. I believe that Jesus wanted us to understand that everything we do here on this earth, in this life, is related to what will come later. Jesus wanted us to be clear about that connection rather than confused.
- III. This confusion characterized the rich, yet poor, farmer in today's Gospel, a story sometimes called "The Parable of the Rich Fool." Jesus was teaching a large crowd and someone asked him to settle an inheritance dispute. As was often the case, Jesus didn't directly answer the question put to him. Instead, he cautioned the questioner about being greedy and told the following story. A man owned a good bit of land and was so successful in his farming that he had more wealth than he knew what to

do with. His barns were overflowing, and still there was more. He was in what they call in South Carolina “High Cotton.” Initially there was just one character in this story – the man himself. In fact in just three brief verses, he talked about himself six times! I have so much; What should I do; I will do this; I will build more barns; I will store more grain; and I will say to my soul “Soul. . . you have done well, eat, drink, and be merry!” He was a man with a plan, he was on the move, he was type A and proud of it. But look at what happened next. God entered that situation and turned it upside down. “You fool!” God said. “This very night your life is being demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

- IV. This is one tough story. A hard-working man dies, and God calls him a fool! We know that Jesus was not easy on the wealthy. Jesus taught that wealth, although a good thing, can get in the way of our relationship with God. “It will be easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter into the Kingdom of God.” But it is not wealth itself that causes spiritual problems. God blesses us through material things, and God wants us to be responsible with what we are given. It is what our wealth means to us that can cause spiritual problems. Rather than being seen as a blessing from God, we sometimes see our wealth as something we’ve earned or have a right to. And for some, possessions become excessively important, creating a false sense of self-sufficiency and security. And like any addiction, an obsession with wealth makes us want more and more, yet not be satisfied and peaceful when we get it. The Romans said money is like seawater – the more you drink the thirstier you get!

That’s why, I believe, God called the wealthy man in this story a fool: because his life was based upon the illusion that through his possessions he could be the master of his own destiny and live both comfortably indefinitely into the future. His focus was upon his success in this life. In contrast, he was “not rich toward God.” The farmer was very self focused, self-directed, and self-sufficient. Little or no space was left for his relationship with God.

- V. With considerable blessing, such as the blessings that the wealthy man had, comes the need for spiritual wisdom, a wisdom that helps us know that our blessings should pass through us -- not be stored away in a barn. You see we are created by God to be in relationship with God and with one another. And one way in which we are able to relate to one another is through the sharing of our blessings – not only our financial resources, but our time and special talents as well.

When Peg and I lived in the New York City area we often worshipped at All Angels

Church on the corner of Broadway and West 80th St on Sunday nights. Here we encountered a congregation where half of the parishioners, not guests, but parishioners, were homeless folks and folks in recovery, many of whom lived on the streets around the parish. Other parishioners included university professors and students and Broadway musicians and actors. This evening service was dynamic – congregants sang enthusiastically, greeted one another with love at the peace, and prayed spontaneously during the prayers of the people, prayers such as “Thank you Lord for the grate I could put my box over so I wouldn’t freeze last night;” “Thank you for the watch given to me so that I could know when to be here;” “Thank you Lord for one more day to live.” Tears often came to my eyes during the Prayers of the People. Within this community of believers, people with few possessions and no barns, as well as those with wealth, were rich together in their relationship with God. Spiritual and material resources were shared at All Angels in remarkable ways and the Holy Spirit was present as that happened. The rabbi was right – we are just traveling through.

- VI. Conclusion: The time will come when we go to our eternal home. While we are here in this life, we have a clear choice. We can store up treasures for ourselves, saying “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, (so) eat drink and be merry” or we can recognize that we can place our treasures in God’s service and consequently be rich toward God!

Our blessings are all right before us. Parishioners of The Church of the Ascension have traveled together for 50 years, striving to be rich toward God. We gather together today, reminded that it’s not only Homecoming Sunday, but it’s also Peanut Butter Sunday. We are called to remember those who are hungry and be generous in our giving. And on this Homecoming Sunday we gratefully recognize those who have been among us for 50 years, even as we together look forward to the future in the baptisms of three children who are becoming a part of our Christian family.

Let us pray:

Give us grace, Lord, to enjoy but not become seduced by the material gifts you have given us. Help us to remember that all that we are and all that we have comes from you. Lord bless this day of celebration, help us to keep you in the very center of all we do, and prepare us for the glorious homecoming we will have with you in our eternal home. In Jesus’ name. *Amen.*