

Proper 13, 2025

Year C

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14; 2:1-7, 11, 18-23

Fr. Robert J. Gaestel

Colossians 3:5-17

St. Luke 12:13-21

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today's Gospel is Jesus's parable of the Rich Fool. The impetus for the parable is something you might find in the Style Section of the Sunday *New York Times*, a column titled, "Social Q's." It is an advice column and it is very entertaining, and at the same time very wise. People write in about many things, and many of them invariably deal with money and families. The questions run the gamut from the very fraught to the utterly trivial and petty, and the advice given is mostly similar to what Jesus says today. Take a wider and longer view, and ask "what are my choices? And after identifying those choices, ask a follow up question: "Then what?"

Jesus's parable is called "The Rich Fool." We know what makes the rich fool rich, but what makes the rich fool a fool? We know what makes the rich fool rich. His ship has come in. His efforts and sacrifices, his prudent management of his assets, his ability to spot opportunities and make the most of them has all panned out. His tearing down existing structures that are no longer adequate and replacing them is akin to diversifying his assets as opposed to keeping all his eggs in one basket. It is hard to detect any foolishness here.

A few weeks ago, Tracy and I went to San Diego to visit some friends who came in from Phoenix. We all stayed at a resort on Coronado which sat by a marina filled with large and beautiful yachts. One can easily ask, "What kind of crimes do you need to commit in order to have all this?" Well, hard as it is to believe, maybe none. About the rich man in the Gospel, we hear nothing about his having bought male and female slaves as we heard in today's Old Testament reading from Ecclesiastes, a book attributed to King Solomon. So, for the man in the Gospel we hear nothing of "All the wealth piled up by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil," to quote Abraham Lincoln. Similarly, the Gospel does not attribute to the man things listed in today's second reading from the Epistle to the Colossians. We hear nothing about a list of vices: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desires, covetousness which is idolatry; let alone anger, wrath, malice, slander, lying, or foul talk." For all we know, the man was a decent guy. The Gospel gives no evidence to the contrary. In fact, the man might very well be wise in the sense that, we hear nothing of avarice. He seems to have found that most elusive of all knowledge: when one has enough. Having enough, he quits the rat race.

What makes the rich fool a fool? As a child, I heard my dad often speak of a person he knew who could talk of nothing except what he would do in retirement. All his energy and effort were focused on having a prosperous retirement. My dad said, "For him, thank God, he made it." There was no guarantee that he would. There was always the possibility of him sharing the fate of the man in the Gospel. Life is hard and then you die. What makes the rich fool a fool is that his question, "what shall I do," or what are my choices, did not go far enough nor did he include the follow up question: "then what?"

To truly grasp today's Scripture readings, we need to do some brush clearing. Beginning with Ecclesiastes, we have a book in the Bible that dissents from the Bible. The late Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." Ecclesiastes says "No it doesn't." No, the arc of history does not bend toward justice. The arc of history bends toward and ends in

futility. “Vanity of vanities” is better rendered as “futility.” Another dissenting voice is the book of Job. Underneath Job is the assumption that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Remember that at this point in the Bible’s history there is no developed idea of an afterlife. Ideas about an afterlife with reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked will enter Jewish thought from Persian sources after the Jew’s return from exile. But this is not here yet. The only outcomes are two. At the end of Ecclesiastes the writer says, “Before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl broken, the pitcher broken at the fountain, the wheel broken at the cistern, and dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Job, having gotten everything back many times over ends with, “After all this Job lived a hundred and forty years and saw his sons and his son’s sons to the fourth generation. And Job died, an old man full of days.” Essentially, at this point in the Bible, this is it.

The second area of brush clearing follows on thinking that in this world if you are good and you do good, you will receive good. Psalm 37 puts it this way: “I have been young, and now I am old, but I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.” By that logic, every person in Gaza, including all the children, are card carrying members of Hamas. Bad things happen to objectively good people for no apparent reason. It is absolutely true that some people can never catch a break. Everything goes wrong. We have great difficulty coping with this fact. If you get cancer, you must have smoked and not eaten your kale. Or, well, you must have done something in your past life. This is how we attempt to come to terms with our terror at the randomness of calamity and its disconnect with virtues.

Finally, the last area of brush clearing is the idea that the material is somehow bad and the spiritual is good. This falls under the term Manichaeism, a religion founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD by a prophet named Mani. It’s dualistic with a struggle between a good spiritual world of light, and an evil material world of darkness. Before he converted to Christianity, St. Augustine was a follower of Manichaeism for 15 years. It is very easy to divide things up in two equally opposites, rather than have to deal with nuanced truth.

The nuanced truth is not either/or, but both/and. And the nuanced truth about material things is that they are not inherently evil. Material things are both created by God and therefore good, and human beings take these good things and using their hands guided by their intelligence, transform and raise them to a higher level which is also good. The nuanced truth is that material things are good, and that they are also limited. The way to become a rich fool is to not take these limits into account when asking, “what are my choices?” Good but limited gives rise to the next question: “then what?”

Last week there was a book review in the *Wall Street Journal* that spoke to this very thing. The book’s title is: The Wealth Ladder. The author counsels that money is great, but abundance creates problems. “It’s easy to say that you would take billions of dollars and deal with attendant aggravations. But such fortunes can make things lonely and complicated. He draws a contrast between the poor for whom most of life’s problems can be solved with a little more money, and the very wealthy for whom none of life’s problems can be solved with any additional amount of money. Such problems include divorce, lawsuits, and overly concentrated investments along with disordered perceptions and motivations.” Or, as King Solomon might put it: “Someone who has built with wisdom and skill must leave it to one who did not toil for it...and who knows if they will be wise or a fool?” Is it any wonder that Solomon concludes “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, it was futility and striving after wind.”

So, what are my choices? One possibility, following Ecclesiastes could be, in the words of the song, *The One and Only Truth*: “My mama told me the one and only truth: Spend your money and don’t look back. You never see a hearse with a luggage rack.” Okay, but maybe there is a more nuanced truth. There is good that is good, but limited. And there is good that is good but unlimited. It’s not a matter of either/or, but both/and.

Here is a quote from my spiritual common place book. *Christianity obliges its followers to see human existence as dark, bitter, and hard, and an unfathomable risk. Christians possess the courage to confront “reality as it is” because of their faith in the power of Christ’s resurrection which is the triumph of God’s love over evil. Such courage is also rooted in their faith that the Holy Spirit has blessed us with the gifts to collaborate with God in bringing about his Kingdom; which constitutes the communion of God with all persons, and the rest of creation made whole by his grace.*

That being the case, St. Paul’s advice at the end of today’s reading from Colossians about how to be with one another mutually bestowing the virtues of self-giving care; and for oneself “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, and whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him.” What are my choices? How about being rich in ways both limited and unlimited so as to be rich without being a fool.