

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
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4 August 2019
VII Trinity
Proper 13 Year C
Hosea 11: 1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3: 1-11
Luke 12: 13-21**

And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

Ever heard Jesus say such things before? Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth; do not worry, consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air; you cannot become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. Really? All your possessions... Everything?

I have a lot of stuff! Because of the way my life has sorted out, partly in St. Louis, and partly in Virginia, I have two houses with lots of stuff. Clothes, shoes, furniture, oriental rugs, dishes, a car, household items, framed pictures, mementoes. A lot of stuff.

There was a point a few years ago when I suddenly feared I might not have anything. A few years ago, probably fifteen or twenty, I was at my club playing squash in the evening after a working a busy day in the cardiac catheterization laboratory. That was my main exercise in those days, squash. When I came off the court I took a steam and shower and returned to my locker. In that short interval my pager had gone off about 20 times. Neighbours were calling to tell me to come home right away. The historic condo building I was living in was on fire. The firemen and firetrucks were there. And the unit on fire was just below mine. As I drove home my mind raced. I may not have anything left. All of my possessions might be gone. Everything. It's a terrible and unsettling feeling.

Many of your are immigrants to this country, actually probably most of us here. I don't know your individual circumstances but I suspect there are some here who came with only the clothes on their backs at the time. Either because of fleeing a difficult circumstance, or perhaps you didn't have anything left. It's terrible and unsettling. I remember when I was in college, just figuring out the world, one of my roommates was a lovely guy whose parents had immigrated to the US from Lithuania I believe it was. His parents were very nice and were fairly prosperous by that time. At one point I asked his mother, how they had given every thing up to move to a new land. She replied, 'When you don't have anything, anything, it's easy to do.' It was a new understanding for me. Not having anything.

How often do we see natural disasters, an earthquake, a flood, a hurricane, or in my part of the world a tornado, and in the news story we hear someone say, 'We have nothing left. We lost

everything.’ Everything gone. Nothing left. It can feel like that. My own hometown seven years ago was hit by a tornado, one of the worst ever recorded, and wiped out a huge part of the town. Homes, schools, offices, the hospital, all gone. My mother walked out of the WalMart three minutes before it was blown away. Only 145 lives lost, but still. Everything was flattened, all trees gone. Stripped bare.

What’s important? How much do we need? Why does Jesus mention our possessions so much? Does he really not want us to have anything? I’m not so sure it’s that but I do believe it is about our focus. One theologian writing about this passage wrote, “When life is considered only in terms of material possessions, we live in fear of losing them and we cut ourselves off from others and from God.” Indeed. I think it is about our focus. What we focus on. What we value. Where we put our energy. When we talk about stewardship, there is an oft quoted phrase that says, ‘If you want to know what is important to someone, look at their checkbook...’

What’s important to you? What do you value? ‘We lost everything!’ Really? Everything? In the gospel passage from Luke today, the rich farmer was going to pull down his barns and build larger ones. “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry!’” But his soul was required of him that very night. If the farmer were going to build larger barns to have food on hand in case of a famine and he would share it with the poor and hungry, perhaps Jesus would have been okay with it. But just to have more and to sit back and relax. He was under the illusion that he could amass enough stuff to remain secure.

Synthesis, a commentary I read, reminds us, that The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights describes a detailed set of conditions which, if present, are believed to be conducive to a good life — freedom, equality, economic and social security, and peace. What is important? What do we value? How much stuff do we need? We lost everything! What is ‘everything’?

In the fire at my condo building, I was indeed just above the unit that burned. A woman, who was on medications, drank heavily, and was smoking in bed caused the fire that took her life and her dog’s life. I had a lot of smoke damage. Everything, everything (there is that word again!) had to be cleaned and I had to live in a hotel for a period of time. But I didn’t lose everything! Really very little. And today I still have too much stuff.

Yet, interestingly, over the last two years I have been living and working serving churches in Europe and the possessions I have had with me are about two large suitcases full of stuff. Clothes, a few books, computer. No real household possessions. And I am asking myself now, how much stuff do I need. I think I really am ready to get rid of most of it. But it is certainly easier to do it more slowly like this than to suddenly lose ‘everything’ in a fire. But really, how much ‘stuff’ do I need as I am only passing through, Madrid, or Rome, or wherever?

I think the key from our reading today is in the final line of the gospel. ‘So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God.’ Rich toward God, not so much our possessions. It is about what we value, what we consider important. Where we put our time and energy; and the life history in our checkbooks perhaps. What is important? What do we value? Our lives, our families, our friends, our church, our relationship with God. What are you storing up? Or carrying along the way? In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, ‘...give us our daily bread...’ Daily, not weekly, or monthly, or yearly, butter daily bread.

Once an American tourist paid a visit to a renowned Polish rabbi, Hofetz Chaim. The visitor was astonished to see that the rabbi's house was only a simple room filled with books, along with a table and a bench.

"Rabbi," asked the tourist, "where is your furniture?"

"Where is yours?" replied the rabbi.

"Mine?" asked the puzzled American traveler. "But I am only passing through."

Said the rabbi, "So am I."

Aren't we all just passing through...

Amen.