

## **Be Rich! (As in the Ways of God)**

August 5, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Luke 12:13-21

Jesus was talking to a crowd. In the verses that precede today's reading, Jesus denounced the Pharisees and Scribes carefully giving back one tenth of everything, even the *herbs* they possessed, while ignoring the plight of the needy. Then Jesus took on the lawyers for parsing words while ignoring true justice. After words about hypocrisy and then about how to confess ones wrongs to God, a man in crowd asks Jesus:

Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.

Do you see the disconnect? Hear the dissonance? Jesus is preaching to the crowd about the essentials of life with each other and with God, and all the man wants to know is how to get "his share."

Now, getting "ones share" may be a legitimate issue – but there are times and place for that discussion and this was not the place. I read this passage and was reminded of the time much earlier in my career when a man and a woman were arguing loudly at a funeral home – just outside the room where the service for their mother was to commence in about two minutes. Family had gathered to celebrate their mother's life, and they were arguing about her will! About twenty years ago, three women in the church I served, sisters, got their comeuppance when, after arguing about the estate of their comatose mother, *in their mother's room in the intensive care unit*, their mother came out of her coma and, as so many of us suggest is more than possible, let them know that despite her coma, she was able to hear their conversation and immediately disowned all three in favor of the next generation!

Jesus – much calmer than people like Ralph English – used the man's untimely question to say:

Be on guard – for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Then, Jesus told another parable – of the rich fool who tore down his bulging barns in order to build larger ones only to have his soul challenged as to what was truly important. In the parable God says to the man:

You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

If one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions – of what does it consist? Do we not know, in our heart of hearts that it is about God, family, friends, community, church and nation?

If one is not to seek riches that invite the maxim to relax, eat, drink and be merry – what should one seek? Do we not know, in our heart of hearts that it is about ways to end hunger, poverty, injustice, strife, .... that it is about working for peace, equality, ....

Here we are between two shining examples of the work of God's people who have it right – between what was done this last week by members of our Junior Youth on behalf of the people of the City of Rochester and those of the Senior Youth who head off to Massena today who will do much the same.

And yet how easily our world suggests otherwise – advertises that one need only have a dream to win the \$77 million mega-lottery – underscoring that what matters is money and possessions.

Like so many of us, I receive stories and jokes via the internet. 99.9% of them get deleted, sometimes after I read only the first lines. I also admit to being just proud enough as to not use other peoples' illustrations to make a point. Life is full of enough examples as for ones words to be unique. An exception occurred this last Wednesday when a member of the church sent me a story that was timely given today's Gospel lesson. I am now about to break another "Ralph rule" and repeat myself, for I shared this story with those who gathered for the praise service this past Wednesday evening.

Charlie went to the horse track every day, "enjoyed the ponies," and would, on occasion put down a few dollars that he then customarily lost. One day he noticed that just before a race, a priest Charlie knew from the city would go down to the track and bless a horse that would then, no matter the odds, win the next race. The next day, Charlie noticed the same phenomenon and so, just before the window closed for that race, he placed a small bet on the horse the priest had just blessed. He won the bet. Over the next couple of days, Charlie raised the ante, betting more and more, winning more and more, and becoming all the more fascinated with his new found way to riches. After more than a week of this, Charlie went broke, cleaned his bank account of his life's saving, went to the track, watched the priest pay particular attention to a really old horse that was placed at 100-1 to win that race, put all of his money on this sure bet and watched in dismay as the horse didn't even finish the race. As mad as he was perplexed, Charlie found the priest and resisting throttling the man, asked in an exasperated tone: "Father, what on earth happened! I watched you bless horses for weeks that always won – and today I lost all of my money because of you!" The priest looked at Charlie and calmly asked: "Are you a Protestant?" Charlie replied, "yes, but what does that have to do with anything?" You Protestants! You don't know the difference between a blessing and last rites!" .....

Charlie had it all wrong, for life is not about material possessions. It is about faith that motivates one to be rich in the ways of God – rich in the ways of peace and peacemaking, grace, love, faith, giving, work projects on behalf of others, .....

Oh, we might be tempted in the way of material possessions as was Charlie – but the words of the duet that Kathy Wakeman and Dick Stewart are about to sing ... is it not on target?

In the morning when I rise ....  
Just before the break of day, ....  
And when I come to die, ....  
Give me Jesus, give me Jesus.  
You can have all this world, Give *me* Jesus

Spiritual, Arranged by Benjamin Harlan

Amen.