

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Pentecost 13-C; 4 August 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro, St. Peter's, Clarksboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201908031544)

The Rich Man's Barns

In nomine...

0. Greetings

Good morning! I bring you greetings from St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Glassboro. I am thrilled to be here with you this morning, and even more thrilled that Fr. Bob is filling the pulpit and presider's chair back in Glassboro! Fr. Bob and I, along with several other local priests, meet together most weeks for Bible Study and prayer. This has become an important rhythm in my life, something that empowers me and encourages me for ministry in this place. And often when I meet with our little community and hear Fr. Bob's understandings of Scripture, I'll say to myself, "St. Thomas' needs to hear Bob Fitzpatrick!" We each bring our own strengths, our own understandings, our own perspectives on Scripture. I believe that St. Thomas' will be better off for having heard the particular ways in which the Holy Spirit chooses to speak through Father Bob this morning, and my prayer is that that same Spirit might, by the grace of God, empower me to utter some word that might be profitable for you as well.

I. Intro

Once upon a time, I was visiting with the wardens of a particular church, when I asked them how their vestry meetings are structured. They told me, "Oh, we always talk about money first, because that's important. And sometimes there's not enough time for anything else." This statement set off alarm bells in my head: ding, ding, ding, ding, ding! I recognize that the Vestry have a fiduciary responsibility to a parish and was grateful that these wardens took that responsibility seriously. But the most important thing?

When money becomes the most important thing to a business, they have lost sight of their mission to make the world a better place. When money becomes the most important thing to a country, the government no longer serves the people, especially the weak and the vulnerable, it was created to protect. When money becomes the most important thing to a charity, it no longer

serves the purpose for which it was founded. And when money becomes the most important thing at a church, that thing that has to be done before anything else, lest we run out of time, well, then, you know a new god named “mammon” has come to town, and Jesus is only getting lip service.

Now it’s true that small churches are almost always a bit concerned about money. Maintaining buildings costs a lot more than it used to. Hiring a priest costs a lot more than it used to. And many of our parishes are no longer busting at the seams, but experiencing a kind of decline that often demands hard choices of us.

But when our collect today speaks of God defending our church because it cannot continue in safety without God’s help, I think often we are ones from whom God most needs to protect God’s church! Our anxieties around money can distract us to such a degree that we fail to remember what’s central, what’s essential about who we are as Christians.

Exactly this kind of situation is what all three of our lessons from scripture today are about!

II. Hosea

Our lectionary this summer is leading us through a bunch of the prophets. I love the prophets because they were Jesus’ teachers. Jesus learned from the prophets and Jesus was widely recognized for speaking in their tongue. People who didn’t understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ had another label they confidently applied to Jesus: they knew him to be a prophet. In word and deed, Jesus did what prophets do.

And what prophets do, Hosea more earnestly than most, is to cry out to unfaithful people that God loves them. In today’s first lesson, God cries out in pain at the faithlessness of God’s people, whom God loves like children. And despite the pain, God is determined yet to woo God’s people, protect God’s people, and call God’s people back to God’s self.

Hosea speaks to a people involved in the worship of false gods and in the serving of false saviors, false messiahs. Baal isn’t the one who gives them a good crop. Egypt and Assyria aren’t the ones who protect the Israelites from foreign invaders. The people have a link to the true and living God, the one who will protect and provide for their every need. But they are

distracted by these false sources of security and well-being, these totems that are more culturally prevalent than the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And so Hosea strives to wake the Israelites from their lethargy and their enslavement to the latest and greatest objects of devotion. To remember the One who actually loves them and has shown that love in meaningful ways.

III. Colossians

Paul does the same in Colossians, only more explicitly. He begins, “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” If you really are a follower of Christ, then follow Christ. Make the story of Christ the controlling narrative of your life, the anchor point around which you shape your passions, your desires, your decisions, and your doings.

Paul goes on, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Seek first God’s kingdom, and don’t sweat that promotion or that mutual fund. Put your heart where it counts. In baptism we have died to the things everyone else is worried about, and we have been raised to a new kind of life, been clothed with a new self, been renewed in knowledge according to the image of our Creator. This changes everything about what and whom we deem important, valuable, noble, or worthwhile.

III. Gospel

And yes, Jesus is speaking in the same prophetic voice as Hosea and Paul. A young man comes to him with a family dispute over the inheritance. That property is the anchor around which the young man’s concerns and efforts and arguments turn. Jesus refuses to get involved. That’s just not an interesting or relevant area of concern for him. Instead he tells a story about the rich fool who built bigger barns.

IV. Invitation

Here’s the thing. Jesus actually does talk about money and politics a lot in the Gospels. He hardly ever even mentions sex, and when he does he says shocking things. So it’s ironic and not

a little demonic that Christians have such a reputation for getting upset about sex and not about the just use of money.

Because just like our story today, Jesus talks about money and possessions a lot, but does so in order to put them in their place. And that place is very low, indeed, in our hierarchy of concerns and passions.

The reason Jesus talks about money and possessions so much, as he did with the person who came to see him in today's Gospel account, was because money and possessions quickly and commonly become, as was the case for the rich man in Jesus' parable, a the focus of a person's life. We do it as individuals, we do it as vestries, we do it as a nation. And money has a deadly, deadening effect on our faith and our lives. It distracts us from what is really important, what is really effective, from the real source of power and security in our lives, which is the God who created us and died for us and loves us. Money in and of itself is not bad: it can be used to accomplish great goods. But money frequently is the root of all evil precisely because it takes our attention, our devotion, and our dependence away from God. And God is the only one who can truly meet our needs, care for us, and protect us against every evil.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God put on flesh, lived among us, experienced the brokenness of our lives and society, and died for us. Jesus died to show us that death is not the end. That even after our body has been brutalized and our possessions, right down to our underwear!, have been given away to others, God still holds us in God's hand and our life is only getting better.

The calling of the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself is all the same. It is a calling away from idolatry in all its pedestrian, every day forms in our lives. It is a calling to know God, to depend on God, to be anchored in God. To know that our very being is securely held by God, and that nothing can take that away.

If you want a rich life, if you want a healthy parish, if you want a noble and secure nation, there's just one thing to do. That is to be rich toward God, literally placing our time, our money, our possessions, our passions, our lives at the disposal of God's guidance. That is how we will make the world a better place, and reap for ourselves eternal life even now.

FIN