

Proper 13 - 10 Pentecost – Year C – August 1, 2010
Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21
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This week I read a story told by Samuel Miller, who was the Dean of Harvard Divinity School. The story is about his visit to the Bavarian National Opera House in Munich during the early thirties. The star of the show was a clown called Karl Valentino. His pantomime begins with a single spotlight shining upon a bare stage. The clown enters the spotlight apparently searching diligently for something he has lost. After some time a policeman enters the scene. “Have you lost something?” he asks. “Yes. The key to my house,” replies the clown. The policeman then starts to help with the search, finally asking, “Are you sure you lost it here?” “Oh no, I lost it over there,” says the clown, pointing to the darkest corner of the stage. “Then why are you looking here?” “Because there’s no light over there,” says the clown.

“You fool,” God says to the rich man in the parable. That’s a harsh rebuke, especially considering the source. Who wants to be noticed by God as a fool under any circumstances? Not me for one. Yet, we have to stand back a bit and examine the story to understand this judgment, and why it is likely that Jesus is telling the man who has come to him for arbitration that he too is a fool. This isn’t the only occasion when Jesus is called upon to arbitrate a dispute between two other people, nor is it the only time He will decline to interfere. Remember Martha and Mary? Martha demands that Jesus tell her sister Mary to help her. Jesus simply pointed out Martha’s anxious and distracted state of mind. He helped her to see how damaging that was to her gift of hospitality, to her relationship with Mary, as well as her own spiritual growth through her relationship with Jesus. In another scene, crowds of men corner a woman caught in adultery and ask Jesus to confirm their decision to stone her to death citing the Law as justification. Jesus declines to comment on the Law, but points out that they too are sinners. To a man, each is convinced to drop his murderous rock in the dirt and walk away. Today, we have a simple one-word description for what the man asks of Jesus. It’s called triangulation.

When we lack the courage to deal with one another directly, it’s a whole lot easier to find someone else who might do it for us. Indeed, there are plenty of wagging ears ready to soak up the gossip of perceived injustice. Some of us even wade in, convinced we can fix everyone else’s problems, when we can’t even deal with our own most of the time. In truth, it is flattering to be a confidante, or a secret-keeper. There’s power at stake here, and the temptation to grasp for it is very nearly overwhelming for most of us. Jesus has no such aspirations, only a clear perspective on truth. The reality of relational issues is much less glamorous. Triangulation usually ends badly, and Jesus never plays that game. He sees right to the heart of the man in today’s story and tells him a parable in order to highlight the real issue that the man faces. The problem is his own attitude to the inheritance. Jesus wasn’t drawn into Martha’s self-righteous outburst either, or into the foolish groupthink of the murderous mob who wanted to make themselves feel righteous by killing the woman, using her as their personal scapegoat. Avoiding the real issues of our lives is hardly a new concept. On the flip side, using others to distract ourselves from our own problems is as old as the hills. Jesus had no use for this kind of foolishness. He tells the story of a wealthy man to make a point. Even though wealth is an obvious candidate for much distraction and anxiety, it is by no means the only one.

None of us wants to be considered a fool, least of all by God. There is a great deal about fools in the wisdom literature of Proverbs and in other parts of Scripture, including plenty of advice on foolish behavior. A fool is simply a person whose practices deny God, or whose life in word and deed rebels against God. So how does the wealthy man in the parable earn the title of fool? Since there is no condemnation of being wealthy *per se* in this parable, then the man’s words and deeds somehow betray that his heart is far from God. Let’s look at what he does first of all. The story tells us that there has been a bumper crop and the landowner’s storage facilities are inadequate to the task. The man has decided to tear them down and build larger barns to accommodate the huge crop. If we are thinking in business terms, it sounds like a reasonable

enough plan. There is even an historical precedent for storing up grain during good crop years. Joseph uses the same strategy when he is in charge of administering Pharaoh's estates in Egypt. *However*, Joseph's actions came from God's gift of discernment. He correctly interprets the meaning of Pharaoh's dream, knowing that God is about to bless the land with seven abundant years, followed by seven years of famine. Joseph's prudence saves the lives of the Egyptians, and of his own family who come to buy grain from him during the extended famine. Everyone benefits from the two-fold blessing of God's gift of discernment to Joseph, and God's gift of food. Joseph is never distracted from the task of caring for others. There is no question that the stored grain is to be shared with the people.

On the other hand, the wealthy landowner in the parable has no such good intentions to benefit those who depend on him in his own community. These are the same people who work the land, and rely on access to the grain for their very lives. The man in the story is completely self-absorbed. Even the language of the parable reflects this, since it's almost entirely a soliloquy. The man asks himself what he should do. He answers himself. He even fools himself into thinking that with such an abundance of food hoarded away he can now relax, eat, drink and be merry. So small is this man's world, so self-centered is his outlook and demeanor that not one word of the dialogue is exchanged with another human being. Not one word is offered to God in a prayer for discernment, or as a prayer of thanksgiving for the huge crop. Not a single thought is spared for anyone in his community who might share in this glorious gift of abundance from God, or who might suffer because he intends to hoard the gift for himself. The man is not a fool because he is wealthy. He is a fool because he thinks he can ignore God, and put his trust in his big new barns and his bumper store of grain. There's also a single word for what the rich man does. In the language of God's economy, it's called idolatry. Does Jesus sense that the man who demands arbitration in the dispute with his brother was actually most anxious because his real desire is a perishable temporal inheritance, rather than the gift of eternal life?

It seems that we can still learn from the parable today. Whole countries can be just as foolish as the rich landowner, ignoring God and God's desire for justice and equality. Perhaps some of you heard about the infamous butter mountain, and beef mountain created by the EEC some years ago. Their ungenerous strategy was to create an artificial scarcity in the market in order to stimulate demand and keep prices high. It seems that no one is immune, especially when our lifestyle is threatened. Who remembers the gas shortage in Arizona a few years ago after the distribution pipeline broke? Prices doubled and tripled overnight. Gas stations ran dry, the lines at the pumps where there was still gas grew long, and tempers got very short indeed. When we get anxious, things get in the way of living into our true inheritance. When we get worried, stuff starts to get between us and God. Distractions shift our vision away from the primary focus of our lives, which is to love God in Christ Jesus with all our hearts, with all souls, and with all our minds.

Miller's story of the foolish clown puts a spotlight on the futility of searching for something we need where it cannot be found. The clown caricatures the futility of idolatry. We will always be disappointed with life when we find ourselves directing our energies in purposeless endeavors. The man does not know it, but he is about to die and God asks, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Do you and I anxiously accumulate stuff, worrying mostly about ourselves, and ignoring God as much as possible? Or do we live graciously, knowing the joy of generously sharing our many blessings, as we give thanks to God? Garrison Keillor shares in God's hope for all humanity when he says, "Even in a time of elephantine vanity and greed, one never has to look far to see the campfires of gentle people."

Amen.