

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 7/31/16
Season: The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 12:13-21, Colossians 3:1-11

We've had a strange and unsettling last couple of months, haven't we? The string of deadly events at home and around the world has left us in a kind of state of shock and numbness. It feels as if tectonic plates are shifting under our feet. "Is this going to be a permanent state of affairs?" we might be asking ourselves. Does the future hold more and more events like these events that make us dread watching or listening to news for fear of hearing about yet another terrible story of death and mayhem? In the midst of such understandable anxiety, where will we find stability? Where is the high ground, the ground that's not abruptly shifting under our feet?

Well, I have some good news to share with us all. The firm ground we all long to stand upon, the stability we all seek in the midst of what feels like very chaotic times, is as close to you as your own mind and your own heart. It's as close to you as the person sitting next to you right now. It's as close to you as the words we hear from Jesus and the Apostle Paul this morning. And Jesus told them a parable.

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'what should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, '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 toward God."

One of my great mentors, a guy who I spent a lot of time with for a lot of years, used to say to me – a lot – "Breckinridge, watch your pronouns!" That is, watch who you're referring to in your conversation. When you say "you," are you really pointing your finger at someone else and not including yourself as being part of the problem, maybe even a major part of the problem? When you say "I," are you being so self-referential that you're leaving out care and concern and compassion for the other? You see what I mean? Pronouns are important. Jesus knows that. In fact, my friend learned that lesson from Jesus himself. So back to the rich fool. Watch his pronouns. "What should 'I' do?" "I will pull down my barns" I will. I will. My this, my that. Finally, God has had a snoot full, as we say in the South. "You fool" What good will all the stuff you thought was going to save your life do for you now? Has all your wanting and desiring

and hoarding brought you anything lasting? Anything enduring? Has it brought you peace? No. And that's why the adjective "fool" as harsh as it may sound, sticks. Because here's the fool's problem. His problem isn't that he is rich. Money, for Jesus, is just a commodity, it's neutral. It's one's inner disposition that's the issue. Plainly stated, it's the man's greed, the man's covetousness, that's the problem. All the desiring and grasping and hoarding and the endless appetite for stuff. He worships his stuff. He's made his wealth his idol. And he foolishly thinks what he covets will save him.

Coveting, I think, is at the root of sin. Have you ever stopped to recall that the admonition against covetous behavior is the last of the Ten Commandments? And of course the Bible is clear that Adam and Eve's story, the story of our primal sin, is a story of covetousness. Adam and Eve coveted the fruit of the Tree and the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And they coveted it because they coveted being like God.

So Jesus is telling his listeners, and he's telling us, that the rich man's problem was a pronoun problem, a problem of his **inner disposition**. Was he rich towards God, as the parable puts it? Or was he rich towards himself and his stuff? Another way of putting it is "where did he place his trust?" In God or in his stuff? The kind of inner disposition, the kind of faith Jesus is calling us to, is faith that will grow and nurture from within. It's born in prayer, as Jane Maynard so beautifully reminded us last week, and it's cultivated in relationships with others, with caring for others and sharing with others and relying on others and allowing them to rely on us. Notice something else about the rich fool? He was all alone. All the "I" and "my" pronouns. Not a "you" or "we" to be heard. He was all alone.

And now let's turn for a moment to the Apostle Paul. He's delivering a familiar message to the community in Colossae. "Set your minds – set your inner dispositions – on things that are above – on God – not on things that are on earth." And what's the earthly stuff that Paul warns against? It's all stuff that's based in covetous behavior. Coveting another person's body for our own selfish wants and desires. Coveting stuff with the idolaters notion that "stuff" will save us.

And Paul then observes the kind of behavior that our covetous desires stimulate. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, abuse. All of those things that separate us and divide us from other human beings. All those behaviors that isolate us and really make us feel small and lonely. But when, by our **inner disposition** we recognize that we have been raised with Christ, that our lives are hidden in Christ with God, we let go of our idolatrous and covetous wants and impulses. We let go of all those behaviors which divide us and separate us from others. In letting go of the old self with all its selfish practices, and putting on the clothes of the new self – this new inner disposition – we are no longer separate and lonely. We are part of the Body of Christ. And all the false and

arbitrary distinctions – Jew and Greek – circumcised and uncircumcised –(a huge controversy in Paul’s time), slave and free – all of these arbitrary distinctions that divide us from each other – they all disappear as we are united in The Body of Christ – as our inner dispositions become rich towards God.

So back to the present moment. Back to these anxious unsettling times in which we live. Back to our longing for stability, for firm ground under our feet. Remember earlier when I said it’s as close as your mind and your heart? As close as the person sitting next to you?

Jesus and Paul both tell us that as our inner dispositions become rich towards God, as our inner dispositions recognize that we are hidden with Christ in God and have put on a new set of clothes – a set of heavenly clothes, if you will, we will stand on firm ground. We will stand on soil that won’t ever shift. Grounding ourselves here in the Body of Christ, grounding ourselves in Christian Community, that’s solid ground we can stand on.

And particularly now, in what is already the meanest, nastiest political season in memory, a time when the kind of anger and wrath and malice and slander and abusive language that Paul observed were the products of our covetous, idolatrous behavior, when all this threatens to divide us from each other – to separate us and tear us apart. What we so urgently need is a return to, a recover of, our true inner dispositions, being rich toward God, being clothed in Christ. That and that alone will pull us back to stability. It grounds us in love and respect for the other and offers us inner peace. In fact, offers us the peace that passes understanding.

Now I’m going to raise my hand right now and admit to you my covetous behavior. Oh, I’ve coveted lots of stuff in my 64 years on the planet. Lots of stuff. I have been the rich fool. And where has it gotten me? Hell. It can sure feel like it. And think about those anxious days and all the anger and wrath and malice and slander and abusive talk we hear – and maybe even speak ourselves. Where does all that come from? I’ll tell you exactly where it comes from. Straight from Hell. From a place of needing and wanting and grasping. From a place of wanting to use other people as objects to satisfy our own needs and desires. It comes from a place of fear. It sure feels like Hell, doesn’t it?

But here’s another thing I know. I really do know where my salvation lies. And I’m going to share the secret with you. My salvation – and yours – and yours – and yours – lives in grounding my inner disposition in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. In prayer. In service to others. In loving relationships. I have never found salvation in any person or thing I have ever coveted. And I never will. I have found salvation – and I’ve found it every day – in surrendering to the love of Jesus. Jesus who loves me not because I’m

good – because I’m really not, you see. No, Jesus loves me because Jesus is good. Jesus loves me in spite of all my needing and wanting and grasping and fear. My stability, my firm ground, in those anxious times, is in my inner disposition to know the love of Jesus.

And my stability, my firm ground is in knowing and receiving and sharing love with others. With my sweet Zonnie and my darling children and grandchildren who are right here for the next two weeks. With my friends near and far. And with my sisters and brothers gathered here in the Body of Christ. Each one of you. This is where I find stability. This is where I find firm ground. Right here in the Body of Christ.

And it’s all here for you and for all of us. Stability. Firm ground. As we turn our inner dispositions to Christ. As we turn to loved ones and friends and Christian community. As what maybe feels like a little bit of Hell swirls around us, we really do know where to turn. Not like the poor rich fool, who turned to his stuff. Our salvation – our health, our wholeness – is close by. We are already clothed with God in Christ, And we **are** standing on firm ground. Amen.