

18TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C
“A Poor Rich Fool”

The Christian life is not about being right. The Christian life is not about being good. The Christian life is not about being successful. I thought that might get your attention. After all, who doesn't want to be right, good and successful? Everyone I know does. But you don't have to be a follower of Jesus to have the desire to be right, good or successful. These are not bad things, but they don't define what being a Christian is all about. Furthermore, there are many ways to define the meaning of right, good and successful. After all, for some people this means strapping a bomb around their waist and blowing up innocent women and children. A successful terrorist is hardly acting like a Christian.

So the question is how do we measure what is right, good and successful? I guess Democrats measure them against what it means to be a Democrat; and Republicans measure them against what it means to be a Republican. But Christians must measure them against the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As much as some people would like to believe it, the words “Democrat” and “Christian” or “Republican” and “Christian” or “Socialist” and “Christian” for that matter, are not synonyms. Some people even measure the gospel against the standard of their political beliefs rather than measure their political beliefs against the standard of the gospel. This is why many on both sides of the political aisle who profess to be Catholics are often an embarrassment to me. By the way, from what I have heard, no economic system or “what is good for business” has replaced the gospel either.

Look at the rich man in today's gospel. He was on top of the world. His future prospects were better than expected. He had more grain than he

knew what to do with. His plans for his future were clear. He was in control. All was well. He looked forward to the time when he could rest, eat, drink and be merry. From his point of view, he was successful. He had done everything right, and he was apparently good, as the story doesn't indicate he cheated anyone to get his wealth. In this regard, he isn't much different from most of us who are planning for our future years, hoping to develop a nest egg so we can retire and enjoy life. But Jesus calls the rich man a fool. A fool! He's like the guy who spent his life climbing the ladder of success only to discover when he got to the top that he had leaned his ladder against the wrong wall! The rich man's life was about to end. He wasn't in control after all.

Notice the irony with last week's gospel reading about the Lord's Prayer. We were instructed to pray for our "daily bread." That should be our desire, to have enough to live a life in keeping with our dignity, trusting that God is with us as we make our journey through life. We don't pray for storehouses full of food so we can be so self-sufficient that we may begin to think that we no longer need God.

Notice that the rich man in the story talks only to himself. He even answers himself. As far as he is concerned, life is totally about him. He is in total control. He is not aware of the needs of the hungry and poor around him. If he has a family, he doesn't even mention them. He is not aware of the God who makes the bountiful harvest possible. *"And I shall say to myself, '...rest, eat drink and be merry.'"* It is at this point that God bursts his world of illusion and calls him a fool. Ultimately, he was wrong, not so good, and certainly not successful.

Greed is a terrible thing. It is a blinding thing. When we believe that what matters most are the possessions we have, then we are "possessed" by

them. We are possessed by an evil, and it controls us! St. Paul today says that greed is idolatry. When we think we are in total control of our lives, we forget that we are part of the bigger picture we call life, and that we are not in the center of it. We forget that life is not about me but that I am about life. And life is God's gift that I share with the rest of humanity. I am meant to take my place among my brothers and sisters with whom I share the gift of life, so we can assist, guide, help, console, encourage one another and enjoy life together as human beings, not just as consumers. We are called to work together to bring God's justice, peace and love to our world. That is being rich in what matters to God.

When I let greed control me, then I compromise what is most fundamental to me as a human being: the freedom to love and to care about others. But as a Christian I know that I am on this earth to learn how to love. That is why God created us in the Divine Image. But instead of life being about loving the people around us, our greed makes our lives about getting more stuff to stack around us. Our world is all about the bottom line, but St. John of the Cross says, "*In the evening of life we will be judged on love.*" That is the only "bottom line" that really matters.

When I lie dying, my financial planner will not be at my bedside, nor will the company you worked for all your life be beside yours. Nor will any of the money, or property, or the stocks we have acquired be there either. We will be surrounded by the people we have loved and who have loved us. This is why it is so sad when a person dies alone.

This whole gospel story is a variation on the theme we've heard so often. "*Seek first the kingdom of God and all else will be given you besides.*" If we don't, life will truly be nothing more than a "vanity of vanities," ultimately empty, pointless, without meaning.

In our world of affluence, this is a tough gospel, and we live in an affluent world. We don't really go without. We are constantly tempted, encouraged, enticed by advertising to covet whatever our neighbor has that we don't. Coveting my neighbor's goods is in direct violation of the 10th Commandment. I can't remember the last time I heard someone confess that they coveted anything. Coveting what others have has so polluted the air we breathe and contaminated the blood that flows through our veins that we don't even notice it. We need God's help. May the Eucharist we now celebrate continue the transformation of our hearts.