

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost 11

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The Church in pre-reformation era taught that purgatory was a place where souls of some deceased languished until they were cleansed enough of their sins to proceed onward to heaven. Purgatory by itself was not a bad idea, the one deficiency with this teaching was that it not only placed the burden of renewal of the deceased on the living but it made it possible for the living to escape their own failures after behaving like the brother who refused to share the family inheritance and the rich man in the parable story. In a sense, we are all in a purgatory of sorts-because I like to look at purgatory, not as a holding place for the souls of the dead, but rather the playground of the living.

Purgatory teaches us that we belong to one another, not only now but in the past and the future. Being in purgatory also means we get the chance to learn that there are no insignificant actions or words. Our actions and words-spoken or unspoken, have consequences, whichever way we look at it.

When I think about the homeless, especially in Philadelphia, I know that our actions and words have consequences. When I think about the hungry I meet whenever I visit Face-to-Face to serve a hot meal, I know that our actions and words have consequences. When I think about the criminal justice system, I know that our actions and words have consequences. When I think about Sandy Hook, I know our actions and words-spoken or unspoken, have consequences. When I think about life at the Standing Rock Reservation, I know that our actions and words-spoken or not, have consequences. When I think about the extent to which some denigrate women,

people of color and other minorities-often placing a burden too heavy to bear, I know that our actions and words-spoken or not, have consequences.

Actions and words have consequences, were it not so, this poor fella would not have sought help from Jesus in his quarrel with his brother over family inheritance. Regardless of how big or small the inheritance may have been, he felt aggrieved by his brother. He recognized his own limitations in seeking redress, and so he found in Jesus an honest arbiter and an advocate. This story is not only about a brother's greed or blatant indifference but it is also about a kind of human depravity that upends genuine relationships.

You know, there is always the human desire for more. We like more because we live with the fear of having less. Having more assures us of some level of comfort. According to Qoheleth, we chase after more, and especially in the case of this brother, we even take what doesn't belong to us, for the sake of having more. The concept of the change of being challenges us with devising a plan to honor our descendants. The honor for these brothers was the fact that they had a family inheritance to share. In fact, the request to Jesus actually proves Qoheleth's point, that we struggle for more without knowing who or what will happen to all that we gathered-and that is the vanity.

More isn't necessarily a bad thing, but how we make the more and what we do with the more is the problem. I need you to reflect with me on this. Which fraction of our king or queen size bed do we occupy in our sleep? I have been to many hospitals, but I am yet to visit a hospital with a queen size bed much more a king size bed. Not that it isn't necessary, but it is not needful.

If you walk with me to the parish hall, you will find the neatly arranged donated items for the annual rummage sale. The cause is great, because we are affirming our mutuality and reciprocity with one another and to those in need. But if you think about it, these were items we once thought we needed to have, part of our craving for

more-which also is vanity. However, overtime, because we have found a lesser need for them, we have embraced the old maxim of purgation being the essence of self-simplification by donating these items to the rummage collection.

The sad reality of Jesus' parable story is the tragedy of the gods we invent for ourselves. We all, like the rich man, make a god of something. But if there is ever a missing link between animals and our perfect humanity, it is when we choose to be so content with the mirage of self-sufficiency, it is when we choose to believe in the gods that we have invented, to the extent that we assume, quite erroneously, that we own ourselves, we are the captain of our own ships and that our lives are in our own hands, after all, we have our own gods. But as tempting as being our own masters may be, our challenge is always to refuse to be the missing link between animals and our perfect humanity.

The problem for the rich man was not about how much he owned, but that he became the missing link between an animal and our perfect humanity. He thought he owned himself or his soul, or at least the goods that he has gathered guaranteed self-sufficiency. But you know the liberating fact about believing in God is that it frees us from believing in anything else-even ourselves. Because all things, except God, is provisional. That is why the Teacher chooses to call them vanity-they are temporary.

See, at every point in our lives, we are presented with an opportunity to reflect our true humanity or to reflect the primal instinct which is so consumed with the self that nothing matters but the self. I told Cliff a story about two men who lived in a village. This village had no electricity and so they had no refrigerators or freezers. One day, one of them men killed one of his cows and shared the meat with all those who lived in the village-including his friend. A year after, the two men were having a conversation when the one who killed his cow said to his friend "remember the cow I killed a year ago, I am still eating the meat from that cow."

The other friend then decided to kill one of his cows-and so he did. But after a few days, the meat began going bad, and so with anger and distaste for his friend, he goes to him and complained bitterly. "You told me that you have been eating your meat for a year, and here after killing me cow, the meat is going bad after a few days." But as he complained to his friend, a little boy came and handed the friend a bag of meat from his father. The friend then told him, that this is what I mean by eating the meat for a year. Because I gave others a piece of my meat, whoever kills an animal, sends me a piece. But when you killed your cow, you decided to keep all the meat to yourself. That is why your meat is going bad.

But because I do not want my meat to go bad, I will follow Paul and set my mind on things that are above, because that is the only way that I can disentangle myself from being consumed with myself, to recognize that I have a perfect example in a Jesus who reflects our true humanity, to take our human splendor seriously and to be willing to make the journey to a humanity radiant with a kind of attitude that celebrates the uniqueness of each person and more importantly recognizes its own limitations.

To literally lift my head and look up, is to admit my own inadequacy and to acknowledge that the human will feels liberated when we accept the consequences of wrong choices, and to be unafraid of the God-given process of being and becoming, and the constant tension between the two.

In purgatory, hope is given a new life simply because we can face the truth about ourselves without any despair. When we realize that there is a love so strong that we are able to remember everything we are and have done without lying, editing or despairing, we once more begin to live in hope. It is this desire to live in hope that frees us to begin the task of inner evolution. Amen.