

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 25, 2016

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The priests of Our Mother of Consolation across the street are oblates of St. Francis de Sales. That means they are part of a religious order in the tradition of Francis de Sales. This is someone I've really known nothing about. At the holiday parade last year where our choir sings Christmas carols, I was standing across from the OMC Church. The plaques by the front door have the initials V+J. Now if you are of a certain age those letters stand for victory over Japan in the Pacific theater of World War II, but I knew it couldn't be that. So I asked Fr. Bob Bazzoli who is a good friend what the letters meant. They are French for Vive Jesu: "Live Jesus." I was impressed with that motto. Live out the teachings and actions of Jesus.

Now our parish library here at Saint Paul's has two translations of Francis de Sales' book *Introduction to a Devout Life*. Being of a curious set of mind I took a copy with me over vacation. A book written in 1608 can often sound a bit harsh to our 21st century ears, and that is what I expected. But Francis surprised me with his gentleness, his desire to overcome division and unite all people in their life in Christ. He has a generous faith.

So here is Francis talking about wealth as our scriptures do today. He says money is like what is contained in a pharmacy or a drug store (I am becoming a little more familiar with pharmacies than I would like). They contain shelf upon shelf of pills and potions to treat various ailments. He says some of these medicines could be poisonous if used incorrectly, or be addictive, or mood-altering. The pharmacist has all these things but is not damaged by them because they are in his store not in his body. So, Francis says, "you may possess riches without being poisoned by them, if you keep them in your house or purse, and not in your heart." Francis says we should be

rich in *effect*. That is we want to use whatever wealth we have, and we all have some, to make a positive difference in the world, to bring about healing. He then adds, we want to be poor in *affection*. That is, we don't want our feelings, our mood, our desires, our heart to be ruled by wealth. So be rich in effect, he says, and poor in affection. It's a clever play on words.

Jesus, whose teachings and deeds we want to live, takes an old Egyptian folktale about a rich man and a poor man and the afterlife. But he doesn't use the story to teach what happens after we die. Rather, Jesus is interested in people's behavior in *this* life. We do damage to ourselves because we have taken the things that should be on the shelf and brought them into our heart. We pierce ourselves with many pains, says the Epistle to Timothy. Sometimes we are not even aware of what is happening. Today we might say we are in denial.

Amos criticizes the people of his day saying they "are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" They are indifferent. Jesus uses the story of the rich man and Lazarus to show the lack of interest in the one suffering by the gate. The story then goes on to ask what if the roles were reversed? Unfortunately, this still does not bring the rich man out of the stupor induced by the love of wealth that has entered his system. He expects poor Lazarus still to serve him. And if not Lazarus, the rich man has the effrontery to ask Father Abraham to serve him by sending Lazarus to his brothers.

Clearly, the rich man is full of himself. That means he can't see past his own interest. He is blind to the needs of others. Ironically, to be full of yourself induces a lack of self-awareness. Then, self-confidence is more of a braggadocio that is easily shaken and rings hollow. The Golden Rule might apply to others but not to oneself. The rich man wants mercy from the one to whom he showed no mercy. If he had desired mercy he should have showed mercy. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matt. 7: 12). He has taken wealth off the shelf and brought the love of it into his heart.

Another consequence of this is that it creates chasms. In Jesus' story there is a chasm between the rich and the poor, between the well fed and the desperately hungry, between those dressed in fine linen and those clothed in

rag. The chasm of the afterlife points to the chasm in this life that the rich man could not or would not cross. There is a life and death chasm that we are struggling with this weekend and have been for some time, the racial difference between white and black. After the shooting in Charlotte, I am not sure we know what to do about it, but we know the chasm has got to be crossed. Our hearts tell us the chasm has to be crossed. If we “live Jesus” we know the chasm has got to be crossed.

What are the insights Jesus might have to share about the indifference, self-absorption, and exclusion that occur when wealth comes off the shelf and enters our hearts? First, Jesus teaches, it helps to remember that we are all mortal. Both Lazarus and the rich man die. What are we going to do with this one life we have? There is a blessing that is often used at the conclusion of funerals. It goes: “Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make this earthly pilgrimage with us. So be swift to love, make haste to do kindness. Shower abundant hospitality on friend and stranger. Walk in justice, that you may follow the path of mercy and love.” We are mortal. Life is limited. Use the time we have to do kindness. And not just *random* acts of kindness. Make it a practice, a way of living. Vive Jesu. Live Jesus.

Generosity is a way of overcoming the chasms that divide us. Suspicion keeps us in our corners; generosity builds bridges that connect. I suppose if I had to choose one word that would describe what it means to “live Jesus” it would be generosity. Generosity helps to make a difference in the lives of others. Because of that there can be no divide of *indifference*. To follow Christ means to give of ourselves in love for the life of others. Had the rich man shown any generosity toward Lazarus there would have been no chasm.

Generosity also includes our ability to identify with the other in need. In his story, Jesus wants us to identify with Lazarus, the one who was poor. Paul observes, “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8: 9). Like Jesus, we are to come alongside the other where he or she is. Paul adds, “the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have.” God does not ask us to

give what we don't have, but a proportion of what we do. And in this way through generosity, we identify with others.

Francis de Sales says that wealth is like the pharmaceuticals on the drug store shelf. Taken from the shelf in the right dose they can do a lot of good. If the pharmacist tries to store them in his heart instead of on the shelf they can do untold damage. Jesus uses a folktale to make the same point. The antidote to heart trouble, when wealth takes control of our bodily or national system, is an awareness of our own mortality and the generosity that makes every life worth living. This is what it means to live Jesus. Be generous. Be rich in effect. Use a proportion of what you have to make a difference in life. And it may be, because of the grace of God, that the effect you have will be out of all proportion to the gift you give.

Amen.