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Reaping what you have sown

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Today Jesus opens up for us a teaching about what can be one of the most difficult parts of our following of Jesus, how to make use and enjoy and, to some extent, accumulate even the material things in the world around us. The teaching we're confronted with today is a very profound teaching in trying to follow Jesus. It's the proper attitude toward wealth, toward material things, and coming to grips with that part of the beatitudes, the very first one where Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor. Woe to the rich." What should be our way of thinking about material wealth, and what should we do by way of possessing wealth or trying to achieve the blessedness of the poverty Jesus teaches about?

The first thing that we might learn from today's scriptures is something that in a way seems very apparent. It's spoken to us in the first lesson today from the book of Ecclesiastes, where the author starts in Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23 in Eighty-first Sunday, Ordinary Time all their work, for one who toils under the sun? Then further on in that lesson, this wise person says, "For here was a person who toiled in all wisdom, knowledge and skill, and yet that person must leave all to someone who has not worked for it." It's a very common axiom almost, you can't take it with you, so at the end of your life, an abundance of wealth is going to mean nothing as you come before God forever. But the gospel lesson goes much deeper than this. It is an attempt to try to show us how to live in this life -- not just at the end of our life when Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11 where we're comfortable with the material things that we have and yet we're still challenged by Jesus: "Blessed are the poor; woe to the rich." What should be our attitude toward wealth and material things? Jesus puts it very bluntly to start with, avoid greed, where St. Paul even, in the second lesson today, is Full text of the readings writing to the church of Colossae also says to avoid greed, which he says, "Is a way of worshipping idols." Piling up material goods can become something that is almost like an idol in your life, you can't let go, you must have more and more and more. The wealth can even take the place of God.

So how do we have this proper attitude toward wealth and toward poverty? Well, our parable today gives us some very profound insight that can guide us as we try to enjoy and rejoice in the blessings that God has put in the world around us, the blessings that we have earned or developed within our own lives. How can we enjoy those and still avoid greed in any form? First of all, it isn't just the accumulation of wealth or not the accumulation of wealth; it's our attitude toward it, our understanding of the goods of the earth. When you listen to the parable, you find Jesus teaching us very profoundly.

First of all, if you notice, the first thing in the parable is not about man producing the goods of the earth, but the parable says the land of a rich person produced abundantly -- a very important reminder. We didn't make the world, we didn't make the planet, we didn't make the land; all of this is a gift from God. We don't own it, it is God's, and that's something that we must have a very deep awareness of, that everything in this world, all the beautiful gifts of creation, these are gifts from God. God produces the abundant crop that comes from that land. We toil and we work it and we do our part, but underlying what we do must be that awareness that it is God who is the Source of all the goods that we have.

Once we get that understanding, if we can really make that our own, then we begin to have a reverence for creation. We understand it as something beautiful and good, and a gift. Then we begin to understand our own relationship to the land, to the planet, to the earth, to material things -- all of these are gifts from God and we are to steward them, cherish them, nurture them, but they're not ours; they belong to God. So that's the very first thing that will help us as we try to understand how we deal with these teachings of Jesus about wealth and poverty. But then secondly, when this man in the parable begins to think about the abundance of his crop, he doesn't remember something that flows from that teaching that the earth is God's and God made it as a gift for all of us. What he does immediately is "What shall I do to protect these gifts for myself?" He is forgetting that very basic teaching: God made the world for all, not for a few.

He's cutting himself off from his community, from his brothers and sisters. "I want to store up these gifts for myself," and then it goes even deeper because once he begins to think of these as only his own, he isolates himself from other people, from the community, so you hear this kind of strange conversation that Jesus puts in the parable, where the person talks to himself: "Self, what shall I do? And so I say to myself, 'I know. 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 myself, 'You have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.'?" There's no thought about the community, about the human family, even his own family, no others; it's all about himself.

He's become isolated, disconnected from the land, in a sense, because he doesn't understand the relationship that he should have with this land as a gift, and he's disconnected from his community and now, because of that, God says to him, "You fool! This very night your self, your soul will be demanded of you." So he's cut away from himself, he's in total isolation, and all those things that he prepared, they're gone. He's in isolation and ultimately, because he doesn't understand that even his very self is a gift from God, he becomes cut off from God. He's destroyed all of his relationships the way they should be: relationship with the earth, with his community, with himself, and with God. This is the tragedy of misunderstanding what God has given to us, the blessings of this planet, of this creation. The ultimate tragedy when we do not avoid greed, when we pile up wealth for ourselves, is that we lose all of those relationships. We become isolated, alone, lost forever.

So obviously we want to try to develop a new understanding, or a deeper understanding of what God has given to us and why this planet, all of the gifts of creation, are given for me, for each of us, but for all of us, and in fact there's a teaching in Catholic social teaching, in the encyclical of Pope Paul VI, that makes

an application of this that is very challenging. It's in the encyclical on the development of people: "Because God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and all people," that's a quote from the Vatican Council that Paul puts into this encyclical, because of that, Pope Paul teaches, "all other rights whatsoever, including those of property, are to be subordinated to this principle: "God made the world for all and not for a few." All other rights of property are to be subordinated to that principle.

And then further on, Pope Paul draws a conclusion, and it's a very challenging conclusion. Perhaps you've heard it before: "Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditioned right, so no one is justified in keeping, for his or her own exclusive use, what is beyond your need when others lack the barest necessities." That's challenging. It's telling us that when we have more than we need and others lack the barest necessities, it doesn't really belong to us. Now if we lived according to this, how different would our attitude be when it comes to trying to find ways to share the wealth? We wouldn't hear words like "redistribution of goods" as something evil. We would begin to think, "No, that is what God intends," and it could change our whole attitude about taxes.

When we pay taxes, it's for the common good to do things that we as individuals cannot do so that everyone can share in the benefits of living in our country and all the good things that can come from that. We would not, I think, find so common the attitude (maybe we don't have it, but some do) that immigrants are to be pushed away because they might want some of what we have. Well, if we have more than we need and they're coming out of situations of dire, extreme poverty, what we have belongs to them. I'm not suggesting that any of us is going to be suddenly able to have this freedom that we would experience, that we'll have it immediately. It's going to be a challenge to try to develop this attitude, "This really isn't mine, all that I've accumulated, if it's more than I need. God wants me to have everything I need for a full human life, but not more and certainly not much more than I need."

So today as we listen to the scriptures, I hope we can at least begin to think somewhat differently about wealth, about what it really means in the beatitude "Blessed are the poor," and that we will do as St. Paul suggests in our second lesson today, "So then if you are risen with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on earthly things." Ultimately, that's what we must do. Look forward to that fullness of life that comes to us when we will begin to live our life with God in heaven through Jesus. But we begin to develop that attitude now by seeking the things that are above and not just seeking the things of earth. It's an attitude we must develop and then I'm confident we will begin to find a way to share, find a way to try to bring everyone into a way of sharing the goods of the earth that God made for all, and not for a few.

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[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Motherhouse in Monroe, Mich.]

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