

Proper 23B – October 14, 2018

In Nomine+

I'm just wondering, this morning, if I am the only person here, who has too much stuff. I have made three sincere and largely successful attempts at downsizing in the past four years. The first, when I retired and moved from a four bedroom house in Morrison, Illinois, to a three bedroom apartment in Edgewater, and then again, when my hopes of never moving again were dashed by the sale of the building which I foolishly thought was to be my ideal home forever, and I found myself, once again relocating four blocks up the street to a two bedroom condominium (from which I can assure you, I will be carried out to either a nursing home or a funeral home, to which one, I doubt that I will care). Still, a year and a half, post move, I have stuff that has not found a home. My closets are full, my storage locker on the second floor is full, and I still have unpacked boxes in my office and bedroom. I might add, that I have made several significant donations to charities and resale shops, and still I am navigating around stuff, and I wonder what is the matter with me.

I know that I am not alone. A recent article I happened upon said that the American tendency to amass and hoard has created a wonderful investment opportunity. They are called R.E.I.T.s, Real Estate Investment Trusts. The boom in this market opportunity is largely fueled by increased demand for storage facilities and warehouses. What used to be a vehicle for investing in malls and shopping centers that sold stuff, has been turned into providing places to store all the stuff we once bought in them. Storing our stuff is big business!

It's hard for me to clearly identify why I have so much stuff. Part of it is hereditary, I'm sure. My parents were children of the great depression in the 1930's and carried the emotional scars from it their whole lives, and they taught me well. Save things, you don't know when you may need them. It's a sin to waste anything. Don't take more than you can eat. Shopping for bargains to help to save money for a rainy day, etc. Then, there are all the things that memorialize actual events and moments of significance in my life, birthday presents, going away presents, course books, clothing items I loved, when I could still wear them. And then there are the things that help mark success and accomplishment. The substantial record and CD collection, the DVD's, the Armani suit, the original art work, the oriental carpets. And I'm sure there are still more. The real questions, beyond why do I have all this stuff, is how great its importance is to my sense of well-being and purpose. Just how important is it all?

Our Gospel, today, brings this question to the fore. We are presented with a man, a rich man, it turns out, who seems to be attracted to some part of Jesus' message. He wants to know how he can inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to observe 'most' of the Ten Commandments, and the man replies that he has done all that since his youth. Then we are told that Jesus loved him, and offered an additional recommendation: Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, then come and follow me. It was too much. The rich man left shocked and grieving.

It is worthwhile to examine more closely the exchange between Jesus and the Rich Man. The man is overly solicitous in kneeling in front of him and calling Jesus, Good Teacher. Jews of the time would have been very unlikely to use the term "Good" for a possibly sinful human being. Jesus,

as a teacher corrected him, reminding him that only God is good. The next thing to notice is that the man is looking to “inherit” eternal life. As a privileged member of his society, he already possessed all the attributes of one who was blessed by God as a result of his righteousness. He is looking for the means to claim what he believes is rightly his, the good life of the age yet to come. Jesus sees his sincerity and also the fallacy and arrogance of his presumption to entitlement, and he loves him for it. But, he also recognizes that the privileged status which his riches bring to him is an impediment to the life eternal which Jesus is truly proclaiming. Making that last step to discipleship is more than the man would dare. He leaves “shocked and grieved” that he hasn’t received what he came for. The requirement to give up what he had in order to attain more was beyond his comprehension.

Characteristically, Jesus uses the aftermath of this encounter to further instruct his followers on their discipleship. He first notes that entry to the kingdom of heaven will be very difficult for the rich. Servanthood, humility, generosity, forgiveness, are not highly esteemed values among the rich, famous and powerful. In modern terms, we might say that their egos require downsizing, not a process that is easy to bear whether rich or poor. To fit through the eye of a needle would require a much, much smaller camel. The disciples seem to be as bewildered by these teachings as the rich man. In second Temple Judaism, there was seen to be a direct correlation between righteousness and prosperity. If the rich were not destined for eternal life, then who could be? What chance is there for ordinary people?

Jesus has encountered this cultural blindness to his message before. His message is new in content and purpose and does not play well with the religious mind-set of 1st century Israel. Personal efforts at salvation through prescribed and ritualized exercises are of no avail. Only complete trust and belief in God and total reliance on his grace, will yield the desired reward. One cannot expect to carry the accoutrements of secular life, even a life lived well, into the eternal life promised to all by our Lord Jesus Christ. “Whoever loses himself for my sake, will find everlasting life.”

In Peter’s lament, we hear and echo of the rich man’s assertion that he has done all that is required. “We have left everything and followed you.” And Jesus’ response is given in reassurance that those who have done so for his sake, will receive inclusion in a much larger and diverse company of the saved. Even that will not be without challenges. But ultimately the grand prize of eternal life will be the reward.

His final pronouncement reiterates the unexpected consequences of total commitment: “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

It is popular in some quarters to see this story as a cautionary tale about the evils of wealth, and a cursory reading might seem to justify such an interpretation. However, I hope that my rather lengthy rehearsal of the story has revealed a deeper purpose to Jesus’ teaching and a more nuanced understanding of St. Mark’s intention in placing it here in the 10th chapter of his gospel. Jesus has been traveling through Galilee healing and announcing the kingdom of God, and simultaneously instructing his disciples in a new way of relating to God as a loving father rather than a distant and judgmental overseer. He has particularly used children as examples of openness and receptivity, and encouraged his students to free themselves from their biases and certainties and risk the venture into true discipleship as children of God.

Change of this magnitude is always hard! We know from our own experiences how difficult it is to let go of preconceived attitudes and prejudices. For whatever reason, we hold on to what we think we know rather than risk discovering what we don't know. Our need to perceive ourselves as in control of our lives is deep and highly resistant to any challenge. We hold onto stuff because we think we will be diminished if we let it go or lose it.

The Gospel asks us what our priorities are. What would we give up in order to enter the kingdom of God. Riches may not be our stumbling block. We may handle our finances as an exemplary demonstration of the highest Christian values. Maybe it's our safety and security, wherever we may find that. Can we stand to be vulnerable? Maybe it is our social position, or our power to influence events. Would our world collapse if we were not counted among the movers and shakers. Maybe it's the self-concept that bolsters and defines our self-esteem. Could we find true humility in a corrective humiliation? Maybe it's our accomplishments. Could we graciously accept the indifference of others?

I'm sure the list could go on. The point is that those things we think we have to have are often the very things which keep us from achieving our full potential as disciples of our Lord. We avoid the critical self-examination that is a requisite to a healthy spiritual life. We hunker down in a defensive stance because we fear the unknown and unpredictable. We think that owning things will make us feel happier, more secure, more highly regarded, only to discover that those things own us, and keep us from living in the glorious freedom that God has bequeathed to us, a freedom that allows us to explore the full range of gifts with which each of us has been endowed.

The true riches of life are not the things we have accumulated or worked to attain. The true riches are those gifts for which we can claim no credit. Life, itself, of course; a habitable world to explore and tend; love and companionship; innate talents and abilities, a sound mind, good health, the world of knowledge and wisdom, the ability to feel empathy and offer comfort. These are the gifts we are meant to cherish and share. Our mindful stewardship of them is what accumulates the unseen treasure in heaven that we are urged to build up.

The story of the rich man who came to Jesus with a clear agenda bent on adding still more wealth to his already prosperous and blessed life is the story of a man who was the victim of his own obsession. The inheritance he sought was already his for the taking. Alas, he had no free hand left for the task. Let us strive not to fill our lives and hearts and storage lockers and closets with so much stuff, that we also miss our opportunity to inherit what is waiting for us.

Amen.