

18 Sunday, Ordinary Time, C

Our gospel reading for today is the story of a man whose life was ruined by prosperity. On the surface that seems a contradictory thing. Commonly we think of people's lives being hurt by poverty. It is the poor of the world who suffer from malnutrition. It is the poor of the world who must live in sub-standard housing. It is the poor of the world who sometimes live and die without ever being treated by a doctor or dentist. It is the poor of the world whose children want for educational and cultural opportunities.

It is the poor of this world who are the real victims of economic circumstances. It is poverty with its many side effects which does the realm of damage to people's lives; so what is this business about someone's life being ruined by prosperity? Surely, the exact opposite is true.

Well, Jesus more than any of us understood and was concerned about the poor. He knew from experience and observation the impact of poverty on the human spirit; but unlike so many of us, he was able to see both sides of an issue. He also knew that wealth did not guarantee abundant living. In fact, sometimes it proved to be a positive difficulty. So he told a story about a man whose life was ruined by riches.

By world standards many of us today would be considered wealthy. We have most of the material necessities and even enjoy a few of the luxuries. Perhaps we would be wise to hear what Jesus had to say about the dangers of prosperity. How is it that riches can ruin a person's life?

Well, one clear and obvious danger is that we will become puffed up with pride and lose all sense of gratitude.

That happened to the man in our story. He saw his abundance not as a divine blessing but as a personal achievement. He spoke of "my harvest", "my grain", and "my goods". And there was a sense in which each of those claims was true. No

doubt, he held title to the land and, therefore, was the legal owner of the crops that it produced. But there was a deeper principle to be considered. That farm had been there long before he was born and would be there long after he was dead and gone. He was in no way responsible for the fertility of the soil, or the shining of the sun, or the falling of the rain. All of these things had been provided by a Mind far greater than his, and yet he acted as if it were all a product of his own genius. His title was well deserved; the man was a fool.

But not only did he forget about God, he also overlooked the contributions of his fellowman. It is reasonable to assume that he did not plow those fields, build those barns or gather those crops all by himself. There had to be a labor force involved. Someone, probably many someone, had poured their sweat and labor into those crops. Without them, there never would have been a harvest.

No man ever gets rich by himself. Prosperity is never the exclusive consequence of individual effort. Wealth is always a social achievement. Society enforces the laws, maintains the civil order, and provides the work-force without which private enterprise would be an impossibility.

My friends, let's be realistic about money and the things that money can buy. Like it or not, we are economically interdependent. I need you, and you need me. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer – we are all in this thing together. I believe in the private ownership of property; but in a deeper sense, it is preposterous for me to look at anything and call it exclusively “mine.” There should always be in my heart a profound sense of gratitude to God and the other people who helped provide it for me. No man ever prospers alone, but it is so easy for prosperous people to forget that.

A second danger in prosperity is that we will lose our compass; on for those less fortunate than ourselves. This also happened to the man in our story. Listen to him as he ponders his circumstances and plans his future: “What shall I do? I have

no place to store my harvest.” This man had a real problem. His barns were already full and a plentiful crop was waiting in the field. He not only had more than he needed; he had more that he could store. And the only solution he could come up with was to build a bigger storehouse.

That is a sad commentary on the man’s state of mind. Apparently, he never even considered sharing his abundance with others. He could have paid higher wages. He could have given tenant farmers a larger share of the harvest. He could have donated to charity. He could have initiated a program of land-reform, whereby a diligent worker could earn and hold title to his own farm.

There were all kinds of things he could have done, but the only thing he did was figure out a way to keep everything for himself. His prosperity had turned into greed, and his greed had blinded him to the needs of others. He never even considered sharing his abundance with those less fortunate than himself. Poor little rich man; what a sad, sad way to live.

My brothers and sisters, we must be careful or the same thing could happen to us, if indeed it hasn’t already. Prosperity is a dangerous thing. It can become a spiritual cancer, feeding on itself. The more we have, the more we want; and in our greed, we completely forget those who do not have nearly enough.

Then we close with this one last thought. We have already implied it. Prosperity is dangerous; it can cause us to lose the real meaning of life.

Jesus called this man a fool, not because he was materially rich but because he was spiritually poor. In his obsession with wealth, he had lost sight of true riches. His barns were full, but his heart was empty, and that’s a bad deal whether you believe it or not.

And I would not discount the importance of money. We all need the things that it can provide. Money is more than money. It is food on our tables; it is clothes on our backs; it is a roof over our heads. It is educational opportunity for our

children and security for our old age. But for all its benefits, money has its limitations. There are some things it simply cannot do.

Money cannot buy friendship. It cannot buy courage. It cannot buy wisdom; it cannot buy insight. And call it as you wish, but all of the money in this world cannot buy happiness. The real meaning of life lies not in what we own but in what we are.

Walt Whitman, the nineteenth century American poet, offered this confession of faith: "I love God and flowers and little children." Did Whitman have money? I don't know. Did he live in a big house? I don't know. Did he wear fine clothes? I don't know. But I do know he was a rich man. Anyone whose life revolves around the love of God, the beauty of nature, and the wonder of little children is rich beyond reckoning.

Don't allow prosperity to rob you of true riches. Own your wealth; don't let it own you. Fill your heart with gratitude to God. Share your good fortune with others. And take time occasionally to smell the roses along the way. **Amen.**