

Family Feud

Over the nearly ten years that I have been the Dean of Trinity Cathedral, I've worked with many families. Too often it was to plan a funeral after a loss. Over time I learned that each family is unique. Some are close and easily make decisions. Others struggle as they attempt to avoid conflict. Some are just plain tense, with long-simmering feuds threatening to boil over at any minute. When I encounter a family where decision-making is difficult, I'm glad that I'm a priest helping them plan a funeral rather than an attorney trying to divide up an inheritance.

In this morning's Gospel we heard a man try to draw Jesus into a family feud. Jesus had just been telling his disciples not to worry because God cared for them, that God knew even the number of hairs on their head. Then someone in the crowd blurted out with his own issue. This man was worried that his brother was cheating him out of his inheritance and wanted Jesus to intervene.

Characteristically, Jesus refused to be drawn into the middle of a family argument. He rightly identified the problem not as injustice but rather the greed of the man who wanted his share. Jesus responded with a parable in which a rich man decided that he did not have enough space to store all of his crops. So he planned to pull down his barns and build larger ones. A modern version might be some of my neighbors who apparently think that one two-car garage is not enough, so they build another one.

As the parable goes on, it becomes clear that it's not so much bigger storage space that's a problem but rather the effect wealth has had on the man's life. That's because what we value transforms us. The man in the parable acts like possessions feed his soul, when in fact they are starving it. Because he shows poor moral and intellectual judgment, God calls him a fool – strong but accurate language.

Wealth in this parable becomes an idol, and that connects it to the passage from Hosea. The Old Testament reading is remarkable because it almost sounds like we're listening to the inner working of God's mind as he struggles over what to do about the people of Israel. God continues to love them in spite of their constant turning toward idols. God is fiercely angry at them, yet his heart recoils at the thought of their destruction. God's love is stronger than God's wrath.

We see that even more clearly in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. That's why the reading from Colossians tells us to seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. We have cast off the old self through baptism. In the renewal that comes with taking on a new self, there should no longer be divisions which separate us. We know that our transformation on this earth is imperfect, yet we are still called to change through faith in Jesus Christ.

The sad thing about the rich man in the parable is that he thought he had all that he needed. Like the one who asked Jesus to arbitrate, he was too focused on possessions to see anything greater. The families I've served who were in conflict likewise could not see beyond themselves to embrace a future of love and acceptance of one another, a removal of the divisions that separated them.

Next week Jesus will have more to say about possessions, and the week after he will directly address family conflict. There will be hard lessons to hear coming up, but no one ever said the life of faith would be easy. On the other hand, it's a lot better than life without it.

[Pentecost 8: Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21.]