

All Saints Episcopal Church
By the Rev. Justin R. Cannon
July 31, 2016
Richness Toward God

A businessman was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The businessman complimented the native Mexican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The fisherman replied only a little while.

The businessman then asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish? The fisherman said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs. The businessman then asked, but what do you do with the rest of your time? The fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos; I have a full and busy life, señor."

The businessman scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and I could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats; eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor and eventually open your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA and eventually New York City where you would run your expanding enterprise."

The fisherman asked, "But señor, how long will this all take?" To which the businessman replied, "15-20 years." "But what then, señor?" The businessman laughed and said, "That's the best part! When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich. You would make millions." "Millions, señor? Then what?" The businessman said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos."

The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, "Isn't that what I'm doing right now?"

The businessman was coming from a world where success is everything and is measured by power, wealth, and control. Heaving more, being more, and of course bigger and better is the recipe for success in his eyes. "The person with the most toys wins" might be his motto. He invites the fisherman into that worldview—buy a bigger boat, more boats, a fleet of boats which would lead to control, wealth, and enterprise. The fisherman asks the right question: "how long will all this take?" In the businessman's world you spend 15-20 years climbing to the top of the financial ladder only to find it leaning against the wrong wall. As King Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes that we heard today, "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity." Clearly King Solomon wasn't content with his field of work.

He had it all. In a section from Ecclesiastes that we did not hear today he writes, "I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male

and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.” He had everything, yet in what we heard from him today, “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and chasing after wind.” Clearly everything he knew was not enough.

In the parable I shared, the businessman’s world view is not much like of Solomon’s—spends his life in toil, seeking status and wealth, neglecting the matters which the fisherman has made time for: family and fellowship.

In today’s Gospel man comes to Jesus, presumably because he was considered wise, a Rabbi and teacher of the law. He cries out to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” It’s a fair request, but Jesus called his followers to a path that forsakes the ways of the world—the preoccupations of wealth and possessions—to make room for the cultivation of our life with God. It’s not wonder, then, that our baptism rite is seen and viewed as a ritual of death and resurrection—we are buried under the water and rising out to a new life. Saint Paul writes to the Colossians, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

He’s not saying to ignore your cellphone bill, to neglect going out with your friends on a Friday or Saturday night, and to ignore caring for your body and home. It’s about where our focus is set—what is our goal? “Eat, drink, and be merry” seems almost to be the goal of our culture. If you go to eBay and look up that phrase you will find a wealth of things plastered with that saying: mugs, coasters, signs, books, plates, jewelry, tshirts and more. This phrase actually first appears in scripture in the book of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon, in his depression, concludes since everything is vanity, this is all we can do. He writes, “So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and be merry, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.” Jesus echoes this phrase in his parable of the rich man, but he magnifies this worldview as falling short. The rich man in Jesus’ parable amasses his wealth and says to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” And Jesus continues, “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded you.’ And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Jesus ends the parable, turns towards the man, and explains, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” This isn’t happy friendly hippy Jesus. In this passage, Jesus offers a warning. Earlier in the same scripture we heard him warn, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Today’s readings are about priorities. Sometimes our priorities need to be checked and rearranged. In the parable of the businessman and fisherman, the fisherman’s priorities seem a bit clearer than the businessman. The businessman’s retirement dreams point toward some buried values, but he spends his life pursuing other goals. What do our actions say about our priorities? Jesus’ parable points towards “Eat, drink, and be merry” being an insufficient sign to hang on the wall of our heart—rather he invites us to be “rich toward God.”

For the fisherman perhaps spending time with his children was an expression of this being “rich towards God”—we all know the love Christ had for children—or perhaps the fellowship with his amigos was also one such express, an image that evokes the times Jesus spent with his friends, preparing breakfast on the beach or celebrating a marriage with his first miracle of turning water to wine. What are areas of

your life where you cultivate this richness towards God? I don't just mean prayer or church, but things in your everyday life. How do you seek being "rich toward God"?

*[Invite people to share responding to the question:
Where in your life do you cultivate this richness toward God?]*

Let us pray

Gracious God, you are the Giver and Sustainer of our lives. Grant that we may ever keep our hearts focused on those things that bring and sustain life, the richness that is measured not in numbers but experienced in the depths of our hearts. Keep us every mindful of your presence, and guide us in keeping straight the priorities of our lives, that in all we do we may seek you will and way. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Amen.

© The Rev. Justin R. Cannon