Year C, Proper 13

Living like a Lily of the Field

Barb Ballenger, 8/3/2025

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

Today's Gospel stops me right at the first line. My mother moved to an assisted living facility this year, one month after my two sisters and I broke the news that we could no longer keep her in her house and be assured of her safety. There was an opening at St. Edward's the extended care facility she'd chosen and that she did not want to move. It was the weekend of her 90th birthday, Independence day weekend.

One month later the house my dad built nearly 60 years ago has sold, and my mother has taken with her the few possessions that will fit in her new tiny apartment.. In the meantime, my two sisters and I have very amicably divided up the things that will fit into our over-filled homes and already cluttered lives. The rest will be sold in an estate sale the week after next.

You may be from a household that is downsizing in preparation for the next phase of life, where most of the items go to the Good Will or disappear in an estate sale, where a few precious things find their way to family members and friends. We know that in life as well as death, there is so much we can't take with us.

This could easily be a sermon about the stuff that plagues us, about the vice of hoarding, about the sin of family infighting over the china or investment portfolio. In today's little sliver from the Gospel of Luke Jesus warns the son who wants more than his legal share of the inheritance, not to be greedy. And he illustrates that with a story of the rich farmer who has such an abundant harvest that he spends all his time building larger storage facilities to store it in so he can eat well into the future. But of course all that is a waste of time because he will die that night, before he has any time to eat , drink and be merry, let alone dip into the surplus grain. Vanity of vanities the author of Ecclesiastes would call it –

The Bible, from the Hebrew Scriptures to the Christian gospels, is clear on the moral and ethical problem of greed, of the how society is harmed and God is offended when a few accumulate more than they need and do not share it with those who are in need.[1] Our Judeo-Christian wisdom is pretty clear on this. We know it in our Sunday hearts. And secular society has made it clear as well – just ask Mari Kondo or look up the Story of Stuff.

But I think we need to go a bit deeper, and explore what greed might be rooted in to understand what Jesus is asking of us today. And to do that we need to keep reading, beyond where the Gospel stops in the lectionary passage for today. The last we heard from Jesus, he wound up

[1] See Wealth and Possessions." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics*. Ed. Angus Paddison. *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*. 03-Aug-2019. <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t430/e357>.

his story of the foolish and now dead rich farmer with: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Then…

He said to his disciples, *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.* … Jesus considers the divine providence offered the ravens and the lilies and the grasses, and asks “*can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” he asks” “If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? … And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”*

We live in a culture right now so alien from the rain-fed, land-based, feast-or-famine world of first century Mediterranean culture, that these Scriptures can be hard to relate to. We are so glutted with material goods that we cannot tell the difference between the mountain of our possessions and the deep chasm of our debts, perhaps because they are essentially two sides of the same coin.

But what does connect us to the Gospel of Luke and his first-century discussions of wealth, is the role of fear and worry that is at its root. Fear dogged them and it dogs us. What if we die alone, with nothing? Who will take care of us in the end?

What Luke puts on offer in response is Jesus’ discussion of ravens and lilies and grasses, which sounds preposterous today when even those things are dying out as the consequence of human greed and waste. Perhaps that’s why we don’t tend to read that part of Luke’s Gospel on Sundays.

As I read these sections of the Gospel, I wondered: who in Luke’s world lived like that? Who lived without a wardrobe and a roof over their head and a full pantry and did not worry about what they were to wear, where they were to sleep and what they were to eat?

In the New Testament, the answer to that question is Jesus. Jesus lived like that. His followers lived like that. Jesus was itinerant, he had no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20), he told his rich admirers to give away their possessions (Mark 10:17-27), he seemed to couch surf a lot at Mary and Martha’s house in Bethany (Luke 10:38-42), to get a meal he and his followers ate the heads off grain in farm fields on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23), and he wouldn’t say no to a free meal of fish and bread, which he somehow could stretch to feed 5,ooo (Matt 14:13-21).

Jesus lived like a Lily of the Field, and it worked, for the most part, for his needs were met the Scriptures tell us, often by women who supported him and his followers from their means. He lived like a refugee, and instead of being detained and shunned or exploited, people flocked to him, to his stories of God and to the divine healing that flowed from his life in God.

Jesus lived like a refugee who was not worried about where he would stay, what he would eat, what he would wear. He had walked away from the kingdoms of the world, the nations that strive for these things, into the Kingdom of God, where the providence of his Abba changed the relationships of all who sought it.

I think our problem with these passages is that we read them as though they describe a transaction between God and the individual, as though we're the only lily in the field, as though the natural world Jesus is referring to is not a web of brilliantly interconnected relationships and diverse systems of giving and receiving, feeding and being fed, dying, decaying and rooting and sprouting.

Jesus is not simply calling us to a different kind of relationship with our stuff here.. He is calling us to live in an entirely different kind of Kingdom, to live differently in the world we're in, to form relationships so trusting and mutual and interdependent that we don't have to worry about living alone or dying alone, and to extend them to everyone. The Kingdom of God is not a gated community for the saved. This is what the early Christians struggled with, and not very perfectly if we listen to Paul's letters to them.

What Jesus' victory over death allows us to do is downsize our worry and our fear and expand our trust in one another, and ultimately to rely completely on the God that provides, to see everything we have as construction material for the world God is creating.

This is how God provides: when you are hungry God provides you with the food in my fridge. When the people over here are homeless God provides shelter with the resources contained in his followers over here. To live in the Kingdom of God is to live in a different set of relationships right here in a world that is stymied by its striving and its fear about what it will eat and wear and where it will live.

To live in the Kingdom of God is to live beyond our means -- our innate ability to be that loving and giving as the Gospel requires. So God provides grace, and people to help us, in the form of church *ekklesia* faith community that is built on love, interdependence and forgiveness when we fail: *koinonia.*

When we live in this way, the world we left becomes uneasy and upset with us, and reminds us how it treats refugees. And whole religious communities can be talked back into those old patterns, and are scared into building storage units for their stuff and for their fear, and blaming the ones who don't have what they need for being lazy and ignorant and lacking faith.

Here is our hope in the face of that constant threat, and it is a fragile hope, one that must constantly be fed and watered: our hope is that when we gather here like lilies, rain-fed by Word and Sacrament not for our own making, when we allow ourselves to be fed and to feed one another with our prayer, our welcome, our conversation and coffee cake, we perhaps leave out a different door than we came in. What we thought was ours, we remember belongs to God. And we walk possession-less into the Reign of God and live in it like it's already here.

Amen.