Sermon | Proper 13C

TEXT: Luke 12:13—21

31 July 2016

Covetousness and Contentment

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Jesus said: “Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness: for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints,

Today’s readings are all about covetousness and contentment. Jesus warns us against all covetousness, and he shows us where in the world true contentment may be found.

And so we’ll start with covetousness. What does it mean to covet? We know, we have these Ninth and Tenth Commandments, which command us not to covet our neighbor’s house, his wife, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to our neighbor. And we think, “Okay, I’ve at least got the ox and the donkey covered. I’ve never coveted anyone’s ox or donkey that I can remember.” That is, unless you spent this week at the Allen County Farm Show, and saw some really sweet livestock that you really wish you had. But oxen and donkeys probably aren’t at the top of our coveting list.

What does it mean to covet? To covet is to want more of what we don’t have. To desire more of the things of this world that God has given, to be restless, to be craving after material stuff, the things of this world. Now, contentment is the opposite of covetousness. When we’re content, we’re at peace with what we’ve been given. We’re filled with thankfulness and gratitude for the blessings God has given us in our lives. But again, to covet is to want more, more of what we don’t have.

And if we look back on our lives, most of us can see this covetous desire manifesting itself in us at an early age. Maybe you were content with your early nineties Nintendo with the three buttons on the control, until you looked at your neighbor and saw his brand new Xbox and all of a sudden, you were unhappy. Or maybe you were just fine in the cafeteria at lunch, with your ordinary, everyday bologna sandwich. But then you looked over at your friend eating a nice, juicy steak. And you were unhappy.

To covet is to want more of what we don’t have. And to covet is to be deceived. When we covet, we live with this illusion that the things of this world are ultimately able to make us happy; that the things of this world will ultimately be able to provide us with the contentment and peace we so desire. But that’s a deception. It’s an illusion. As Jesus said, true contentment isn’t found in the things of this world. The abundant life does not consist in having abundant stuff. But our sinful nature thinks that it does.

And the sinful nature, that Old Adam is always with us, even as Christians. And the sinful nature will always be covetous. It will always be hungry, thirsty, it will never be satisfied, it will always be craving and desiring more, more of what we don’t have. It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor, if you’ve got a lot of stuff, or only a little stuff, covetousness will always be there. Covetousness is a desire that sticks to our bones right up to the grave. If you have a billion dollars, you’re not happy until you have two billion dollars. If you’re the second richest person on earth, you’re not happy until you’re the richest person on earth. And if you’re the richest person on earth, you’re not happy, until you richer than you already are. Covetousness is always there, part of our sinful nature.

Most of us—I’d wager a guess—most of us don’t covet a billion dollars. Because we know we’ll never get it. Most of us covet a little more than what we have right now. We can see ourselves coveting when we start a sentence with, “if only.” “If only I could have a boat, and a lake house to keep my boat, then I’d be content. I’d be living the good life.” “If only I could have a job, a job that I knew I could retire from. Then I’d be content. I’d have security, and I wouldn’t have to worry.” “If only I could have a clean bill of health. Then I’d be content because I would be able to spend a few years with my kids, my family.” If only I could have a little more than what I have right now. That’s the language of covetousness.

And so our readings for today introduce us to two people, two men. And what we learn in their stories is one lesson—it’s a simple lesson, but an all-important lesson. And it’s this: true contentment isn’t found in the things of this world. But the secret to the abundant life, the truly contented life, is found in God alone.

The first person we meet is King Solomon. I’m not going to rehash Solomon’s whole story. For that, you can join us in Bible Class, where we’ll talk more about Solomon and Ecclesiastes. But suffice it to say, that Solomon was rich beyond your wildest dreams. Who was Solomon? Solomon was king of Israel. We remember right at the beginning of Solomon’s reign, when he was anointed king, God said: “Ask me for anything. Ask for anything and I’ll give it to you.” Solomon didn’t ask for wealth, women, wine, a bigger kingdom, more soldiers, or anything like this. Solomon wasn’t interested in worldly glory. What Solomon asked for was wisdom. In the Hebrew, it was literally, “listening ears.” “Give me listening ears that are attentive to your Word. And then I’ll be wise. I’ll have wisdom.” Because true wisdom comes from the Word of God. He says in his book Proverbs, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*.”

And so God heard Solomon’s request, he was pleased with his request. He said, “Because you didn’t ask for worldly stuff, but for wisdom, here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you wisdom, and everything else. I’m going to give you wealth, a name, make you a king unparalleled in the world.” That’s what happened. Solomon’s forty years of being king was a period of unparalleled prosperity in all of Israel. Solomon saw the wealth of nations coming to him. He had the Queen of Sheba come and pay him homage. It was said that silver wasn’t even valuable in Jerusalem because everything was covered in gold. Solomon had it all. But God gave it to him on one condition. “Don’t worship false gods. Don’t bow down to foreign idols. Because if you do, I’m going to take it all away.”

Trouble was, Solomon had 700 wives. Some of those women turned his heart away from the worship of the one true God. He fell into idolatry. Toward the end of his life, God said, “Because you have done this, I’m going to take your kingdom and give it to your servant.” And by the end of his reign, much of the glory of his kingdom was gone. And he gets to the end of his life, and writes Ecclesiastes which takes us to the Old Testament for today. And do you know what he calls all of his wealth, all of his treasure and possessions, all of his accomplishments and achievements? He calls it “*vanity*.” “*Vanity of vanities says the preacher…all is vanity*.” That word vanity means meaninglessness, emptiness, like a vapor. Melts into thin air. The treasures of this world are here today, gone tomorrow. You can’t take it with you. All of it gets passed on to the person who comes after you. And “who knows,” Solomon asks, “whether that person will be wise, or a fool?” He’s warning us against finding contentment in the things of this world. He says, “take it from me, the richest person there ever was—it’s just vanity.”

And then we get to the Gospel. And Jesus tells the story, a Parable, about another man who was very much like Solomon. He was a rich man. He had a very prosperous farm. One year, he had such a bumper crop, that he had nowhere to put it. So he sought contentment in bigger barns. He started in with the ‘if-only’s.’ “If only I could have bigger barns, then I’ll have lifelong security, I’d be happy and content forever. Then I’ll finally be able to relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But that night, he died. And God said to him, “*Fool, this night, your soul is required of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be*?” Just like Solomon. You can’t take it with you. And so, now matter how rich we may be, true contentment is never found in the things of this world. We may go looking for contentment there, but we will never find it. As we just sang in the Hymn of the Day, “The world seeks after wealth, and all that mammon offers. Yet never is content, though gold should fill its coffers.” And so the question remains: where can we find true contentment, and lasting peace?

And for that, we go to the Epistle. St. Paul gives us the answer, Colossians 3: *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 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. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

And that’s the answer. That’s where true contentment is found: in Christ. And the good news, as St. Paul says, is that we’ve died with him, and been raised to new life in him. That’s baptismal language. That’s what happened in our baptism. We were buried with Christ, and raised to new life with Christ. And now, St. Paul says, “*You’re life is hidden with Christ in God*.” Do you know what that means? Our true value, our true worth, isn’t bound up to what we have, or what we don’t have. Our value, our meaning and purpose in life doesn’t come from whether we have a nice job, or a nice salary, or a lake house with plenty of toys, or a clean bill of health, or a fully stocked fridge. None of these things can give us the true contentment we so desire. But the peace that passes all understand is found in Christ, and Christ alone.

You see, in Jesus we have a treasure that is safe and secure, regardless of the circumstances of our lives. We might find ourselves poor, or sick, or in distress, or with death knocking at our door. We might suffer the devil to take it all. We might lose our life, goods, fame, child, and wife. But the promise of the Gospel is that none of these things, none of the tragedies that befall us in our lives, can strip us of the riches we have in Christ. And that’s the difference between earthly wealth, and spiritual wealth. Earthly wealth is a here today, gone tomorrow wealth. But the riches of Christ and his grace, is a treasure that lasts.

The devil can take plenty of things away from you, but he can’t take away from you this: Christ has died for you, shed his blood for you, gone to the cross, to secure your redemption. And now, risen from the dead, he gives you the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation as a free gift of his grace. And that Jesus, crucified and risen for you, has ascended into heaven, and holds all things in the palm of his hand. Nothing happens outside of his power. And he fills all things. He is with you always even until the end of the age, and he promises to come back for you on the Last Day. Again the devil can take away plenty of things. But that’s a treasure that’s safe. It’s a treasure that neither moth nor rust can destroy, thieves cannot break in and steal—the promise of the Gospel is a treasure that lasts forever.

And so, St. Paul says, “*seek the things that are above*.” Lift up your eyes, from worldly things. Repent of covetousness. And look to Jesus in faith. Come into his presence and stand as a receiver of all the gifts that Jesus is here to give you now— that is where true contentment is found. Not in the things of this life, but in Jesus. And you have him today. He gives himself to you, under bread and wine, his body and blood, joined to yours. And you will rise with him on the Last Day.

“The world seeks after wealth and all that mammon offers, yet never is content, though gold should fill its coffers. I have a higher good. Content with it I’ll be. My Jesus is my wealth, what is the world to me!”

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*