Proper 13C

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All Saints’ Wolcott

A little over eight years ago, I was preparing for retirement, and Jerry and I were preparing to move. We were cleaning out closets and cupboards, bookshelves and files, and getting rid of all the "stuff" we had collected over the years that tends to make moving our household something akin to transporting the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus (or the Library of Congress, considering the number of books we have). It is remarkable how much "stuff" one can accumulate in the course of a few years. And you know what? Moving doesn’t help a whole lot - no matter how much stuff we got rid of then, we have just as much more, now - all those folks working on stem cell research should come research the way things breed and multiply in my closets!

During that time, I pored over magazines like House Beautiful and Better Homes and Gardens, and became a devoted viewer of TV’s Home and Garden channel, where smiling, picture-perfect people inhabit picture-perfect houses and cook up picture-perfect meals to serve to their picture-perfect guests, all of whom are seemingly completely unaffected by any local heat, humidity, or other extremes of weather. Martha Stewart I am not. These people do not have closets like mine, stuffed to the gills with mementoes of kindergarten, and third grade drawings and handwriting samples - and these are not from my children's school years, they’re from *mine*!

What is it in us, I wonder, that causes us so much anxiety about the future that we cling for all we're worth to tangible evidence of *past* security? Is it that a strangle-hold on such items somehow enables us to "relax, eat, drink, and be merry" and live in big-time denial about the inevitability of the future, when we ourselves will no longer be here, and such "stuff" will no longer be our security? Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and fires in the news have taught us all a lot about the relative value of “stuff.” Even those who have not lost houses and “stuff” found that the value of such objects paled in comparison with the priceless treasure of family, friends, and community in general.

The same is true, of course, about money. Like the anxious rich man whom Jesus describes in his parable, some of us keep building bigger and better barns in which to store up our financial treasures. Some rent lock boxes to store up deeds and bonds and stock certificates, and, like the young man Luke describes, some worry endlessly about how the family inheritance will be divided. As the old adage says, you can't take it with you. Each time I preside over the interment of a parishioner’s ashes, I am struck by the sobering realization that when the time comes for my own interment, all that remains of this earthly body can be contained in one Ziploc bag. That does tend to put material possessions in perspective!

There are good ways, of course, of easing our anxiety over the future of tangible treasures. Planning is important. We are cautioned - even by the Prayer Book! – about the importance of making wills, *while we are in good health*, arranging for the disposal of our temporal goods to our surviving family members, as well as to the Church (our family in Christ) and to other charitable institutions. You may be interested to know that this instruction on good stewardship of the gifts with which we have been entrusted comes from the rubrics of the service for the "Thanksgiving for a Child" (page 445).

We are also encouraged to make so-called "living wills," (or advance directives) so that the closing hours of our earthly bodies might be attended with dignity and respect when we may no longer be able to make decisions for ourselves. And we are encouraged - even by that great silo of society known as the State of Connecticut! - to become organ donors, so that, in the event of what might be an untimely death, still healthy parts of our bodies might bring new and wholesome life to someone else.

Whenever I read of lottery and Powerball winners (such as from last night’s drawing), I wonder what provisions, if any, they have already made for both their biological families and their Church families; and, if they have not already done so, how soon (if ever) they will arrive on their own attorneys’ doorsteps with that purpose in mind. It does make one wonder if the Evangelist Luke could see into the future and deliberately address such phenomenal circumstances as Powerball and lottery winners!

Recently, I have begun imitating my mother-in-law, who for years now has been systematically giving away to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren family heirlooms, in part so that she can participate in their enjoyment of some family treasures. In a sense, I think that's what God has done with us in giving us all the good things we have received in this life - gifts of energy, various capabilities, the beauty of the natural world, and, yes, wealth; in part, so that God might participate in our soul's enjoyment of those good gifts.

But God also knows that *life* – the kind that lives now and beyond the grave - the enjoyment of living in and for the kingdom of God – that kind of life does not consist in abundance of possessions. When the going is good, the stock market high and unemployment at record lows, the temptation is strong for all of us to go beyond enjoying the relief of necessities which such abundance allows, and to build up bigger and better barns in which to hoard our resources; clutching every grain of them to us so that they become for some of us an idol; a god to rival the one true and living God. In fact, the God with a capital "G" is the only one who goes on living for ever. Since the Great Recession, we have seen a widening of the great divide between the very rich and the very poor. Now the markets are reviving, and while things are better for some, they are not for all. We have seen a tremendous buildup of greed in our country’s and in the world’s financial practices, to the detriment of many who were already on the verge of poverty. We Christians who have vowed to work for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being must put our individual and collective wisdom and energy to work to establish justice for all in this world of staggering wealth and waste.

Which will be our God - the barn or the Lord? We can build all the bigger barns we choose, but no barn we can build is big enough to store up life, and no security system is clever enough to lock out death, which will come to each of us in due course. Only the God of love, working for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is able to store up for us everlasting life, and to lock out the power of sin and death which would try to keep us from it.

We are invited to participate in the eternal life of our Lord. Through careful planning of our estates, not only our children, but the spread of the mission of Christ in the Church may be sustained and enlivened for generations to come. So please - when you do your estate planning, include your clergy in your council of advice. Size of estate is not important; even the widow's mite is important to the future of the Kingdom. But *planning* is important for those who care.

In our planning, let us take care to bequeath to our children a spiritual inheritance as well, building up in them an understanding of good Christian stewardship in the light of the richness of everlasting life which is the foundation of our faith, and which has been bequeathed to us by Jesus Christ himself. Let us also hand down to our children those virtues which Paul enumerates in his letter to the Colossians: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, gratitude. “If you have been raised with Christ,” he says, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Let us concentrate not on building bigger barns to house all the “stuff” we can hand down to our descendants, but on building a legacy of patience, courage and hope, so when the tough times come – and they will – our children will be able to resist the temptation to despair.

“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal,” we pray in the hymn we will sing at the close of this service. The Gospel of Christ Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting with our Savior Jesus Christ; may our prayer be always that the fullness of the kingdom of God for which we long find us not “rich in things and poor in soul.”

The great Creator God, who has called us all into being, who delivered our ancestors out of bondage to slavery in Egypt and, through the death and resurrection of his own Son, Jesus the Christ, has delivered us all out of bondage to sin and death and granted us the great gift of life beyond the grave, calls us to make the best use of this life which we have received from God.

This life endows us with a fabulous gift of time; a chance freely to prepare ourselves and those who come after us for a future when closets and barns and security systems will no longer be needed; when all that is needed is the incomparable richness of standing face to face with Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life.