

Proper 13 Year C – Inheritance

The Collect: Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hosea 11:1-11 The sad, parental God

(or Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, 12-14, 2:18-23) All is vanity

Psalm 107:1-9, 43 God satisfies the thirsty, fills the hungry

(or Psalm 49:1-11) We cannot ransom ourselves or deliver to God our price

Colossians 3:1-11 If you are in Christ, seek things from above

Luke 12:13-21 The foolishness of bigger barns

I am here to talk about inheritance. The Gospel today involves some sort of dispute between a couple of brothers over their inheritance. A few weeks ago we heard a lawyer ask Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25ff, Proper 10)

During Lent in Year C we hear the story of the Prodigal Son who wants his inheritance before his father has even had the courtesy of dying (Luke 15:11ff, Lent 4C).

In Luke 18 we have the story of the rich young ruler who wants to know what HE must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus tells him it’s easy-peasy – “... just give away everything you have and give to the poor, and follow me.”

In Luke 20 we have the story of the wicked vine-growers, the wicked tenants who refuse to pay their rent at harvest time, mistreat the rent-collectors, and conspire to kill the son of the

landowner in some misguided hopes they will inherit the estate – after all, possession is nine points of the law, right?

Inheritance.

The laws and customs surrounding inheritance vary from place to place, but they all boil down to who gets what, how much, and when.

When my grandmother turned 80, she figured it was time to update her last will and testament. She found an attorney to write it up and had him send a letter to each of her children. It was short, sweet, and came right to the point.

“I am preparing to write up my last will and testament. If anyone feels I owe them anything, you have 30 days to contact me so we can settle up. Otherwise, I’m dividing up my estate the way I want.”

She was not a rich woman. She lived in a home-made shack with tar paper siding. But she also knew her children, and she knew human nature, and she knew her scriptures, and so she did everything she could to keep her family from squabbling over her bones like a pack of hyenas.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” (*Luke 12:13*)

The point about inheritance we sometimes overlook is someone has to die. In Jesus’ day, inheritance had less to do with money and more to do with property.

When Israel came into the promised land after the Exodus, the land was divided up amongst the 12 tribes. That was their inheritance. That was God's gift to them, and the land was handed down from generation to generation to work, to take care of.

It wasn't theirs to own, as much as it was theirs to take care of and pass along to future generations.

It was sort of that Native American sense that "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."

The Hebrew scriptures put it this way: "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." (1 Chronicles 29:14)

That's a biblical understanding of the land and our relationship to the land.

But in the days of Jesus, the world has changed. The ideal of stewardship had shifted to a focus on ownership. Land was less inheritance and more of an asset. It could be bought and sold like fishes or figs, wheat or wine, sheep or oxen.

The land tied you down, but gold and silver freed you up, so you could leave and go places (like the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who said, "I want my money and I want it NOW!").

Inheritance requires death, and in all our stories about inheritance in the Gospel of Luke, we find a common theme, a common element: Death.

But not just death of the father (who, in the parable of the prodigal son hasn't even died yet) , but death between brethren.

In the Prodigal son, the kid says, "Dad, you and my brother are dead to me. Give me what's mine; I'm leaving."

When he comes home, he is shocked by his father who runs out, embraces him, protects him, and restores him to the family. Life after death!

The older son says, "Dad, now **you're** dead to me. You never treated me like that. Your other son is also still dead to me. That hasn't changed."

In some ways, they're replaying the story of Jacob and Esau from the book of Genesis, aren't they?

Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, his blessing. Jacob had to flee for his life to a far country, worked 14 years for his uncle Laban (who also cheated him by switching daughters – Rachel and Leah), stole the Laban family gods, and finally returned home where he had sort of this half-hearted reunion with his brother Esau, after which they went their separate ways. (Genesis 28-30)

In the Gospel today, we see nothing has changed. Not only is the father dead (apparently), but the surviving brothers are also now dead to one another.

This is the tragedy Jesus sees and points out. “Who made me a judge and arbiter over you?” he asked.

It’s not about what we have, but what has us.

As Jesus says, “Beware, and be on your guard against EVERY form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does their life consist of their possessions.” (12:15)

The question we have to face is this: Who’s doing the dying, and who’s doing the killing?

“Thou shalt do no murder,” says the Commandment. But isn’t that what’s happening in this story?

God has given us hearts with which to love and heal, but fear and greed have freeze-dried those hearts, turning them into stone cold blocks of ice.

Look at Gaza. People aren’t starving; they’re being starved. People aren’t dying. They’re being killed. Palestinians are dead to the Israelis, and Israelis are dead to the Palestinians.

Before we point fingers, though, we also have to ask how we’re doing.

Are we doing any better in these days of heightened outrage between left and right, rich and poor, gender fluidity and gender rigidity, and all the other polar opposites with which we struggle to live and move and have our being?

Is that how you want to live? Is that how we want to live?

“You may think you’re building barns,” says Jesus, “but in reality, you’re only building mausoleums into which God will lay your body and soul for all eternity. Is that what you want?”

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance.”

Abundant life has nothing to do with our possessions, but with our relationships.

In our Mission Statement here, we say that we believe that “God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.”

That comes from the mind of God, that comes from the heart of Jesus, that comes from the breath of God’s life-giving Spirit.

Jesus begs us to step out of ourselves long enough to see what we are doing to one another and asking, “Is this what God wants? Is this leading us towards the light, or into darkness? towards life or death? towards healing or destruction? towards wisdom or towards foolishness?”

As Jesus says, we can't control whether we will live or die, but we can choose how we shall live until we die.

That choice is our inheritance. So let's choose wisely, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

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