

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (8/4), 2019

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

I have had occasion, some time ago, to make a round trip to North Carolina. In the course of my travels, I noticed evidence of a phenomenon I had been aware of somewhat casually over the years but which came into focus with increasing clarity as I made this trip.

I refer to the presence along most highways of sites containing row upon row upon row of one-story buildings with innumerable garage-like doors across the front of them. Some of these sites cover an acre or two of ground. They are, inevitably, surrounded by a high fence...often topped by barbed wire.

They are, it seems, storage facilities. One pays a sum each month and, in return, is allowed to use the room behind these garage-like doors to store whatever one wishes to store.

As I noted, I have been aware of these places in passing, but it was only this last week that I began to reflect a bit on them.

Are we so awash in “things” that we cannot fit them in our houses? Are our houses, which are of square footages hardly imagined fifty or a hundred years ago, so poorly planned that a reasonable number of belongings could not fit in them? What is it that is going on that this people with whom we are fellow citizens has so many possessions that we seem to be overflowing at the edges?

We are, without a doubt, inundated with material possessions, and there is an overwhelming tide of media seeking to convince us that we need more of this and more of that...and that this item we bought a year ago is outmoded, and we need a newer model...and on and on and on. Heavens, while much that comes to the Yard Sales would clearly be done a service by sending it to the dump, there are many items that are equally clearly perfectly usable and must, for whatever reason, no longer be deemed worthy of keeping or even storing in the storage facility with the garage-like door on it.

Jesus is rather direct today in his address to a crowd that has been following him. One member of the crowd has asked Jesus to take his side in a property dispute with his brother. Jesus refuses, but he then uses the occasion to try to make a point to the larger multitude regarding the things of this world and human beings' approach to those things.

He tells of a well-to-do fellow who decides he needs more space for his possessions. His current barns are already filled up, so he has decided to tear them down and build others...others that are bigger. Then, thinks he, he can rest comfortably, all his stuff will be safe and sound, and he can eat, drink, and be merry.

Of course, we all know that God essentially laughs in his face and says to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you...”

And we are left somewhat breathless by the reality, when viewed from this perspective, that we don't have a great deal of control of much of anything. All our storing up...all our coveting...all our amassing...is of little or no value when we confront the reality that has supplied fodder for jokes and cartoons for centuries...the reality that, "You can't take it with you."

Now, we need to be extremely clear. Nowhere in this passage, do we find Jesus condemning the things of this world. It is this world and this life that he came into our midst to sanctify and to save.

Over and over, in his journey, he extolled the beauty and the virtue of this life and the things within it... all those wondrous things that are gifts from the creator of all that is...seen and unseen.

What Jesus condemns is an attitude...an approach to life...a sense of entitlement and covetousness...a lack of perspective and of proper valuing of the elements of our journey.

His is an utter dismissal of those who, in the words of the old hymn, would be "rich in things and poor in soul"...those who would devote their entire lives and beings to the amassing of things...to an obsession with things...to becoming so wrapped up in things that they must be stored in bigger and bigger barns...in row upon row of buildings with garage-like doors.

How different might Jesus' reaction have been if the man were building the barns in order to be able to store more of his abundance in a safe and dry stop along the way of his distributing this abundance to those in need...to those who have not been so richly blessed as he.

But that isn't what is going on, and Jesus teaching is utterly clear. It is hardly a new teaching. The writer of the passage of Ecclesiastes centuries before had sought to teach the same lesson...and had suggested this endless striving after things to be about as useful to a person's soul as if that person were to spend a lifetime striving after wind.

Paul writes to the Colossians and seeks to show them the opposite side of such striving...seeks to call them to a life that is rich in compassion, kindness, lowliness, and meekness...in short, a life lived outside oneself and an endless focusing upon amassing more and more things and storing them away so that no one else can get near them.

Dear friends, as with so very much of the Faith, what confronts us today could well be used as a tool to condemn us and the things of the world...but that would be wrong. Rather, what it is calling us to is a matter of perspective...a matter of priorities. What is it asking of us is that we look at our lives and seek honestly to understand if we own the things of our lives or if they own us.

If we find that the latter is truer than the former, perhaps we would be wise to contemplate if we mightn't wish to change that...change it before it is too late, and we have wasted the richness of this journey by hiding it away rather than rejoicing in it and using it for the good of the world Christ came to sanctify and to save.