

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

Luke 12: 13 - 21

There are two pieces of background information that must be understood for this parable to be fully comprehended. The first is the address Jesus uses in speaking to the brother in the crowd who wants Jesus to talk to his brother. The word, "Friend," found in the New Revised Standard Version, is far too gentle. The word in the original Greek is *anthropos* which means "Man". (Indeed, this is how the word appears in other translations such as the NIV.) In the Middle East, however, to address someone as "Man" is an insult and is usually followed by a criticism of the person addressed. Jesus' reply to the person in the crowd is harsh. In fact, the closest English paraphrase might well be, "You jerk!"

The second point to be understood is to grasp how central to Middle Eastern life is conversation. It is in fact one of the great joys of people's lives. A good argument is a time of pleasure. A Middle Eastern man will make no decision of even the slightest importance without consulting with his family members and his friends. A little game that is sometimes played is to discuss a problem that has a simple and obvious solution and to see how long the conversation can be maintained without arriving at that easy answer. If someone is so thick-headed as to point out the obvious answer, the fun has been spoiled for everyone else.

With these two facts in mind, let us examine this week's passage. A man who is in the midst of an inheritance dispute calls out to Jesus to settle the matter between himself and his brother. There was nothing unusual about the request; rabbis were often called on to arbitrate such disputes. Notice, however, that the man does not ask Jesus to mediate between the two brothers. Instead, he calls for Jesus to "tell my brother" to do what I want him to do. Also notice that Jesus does not get into the question of the fair and proper distribution of the property. There is a much greater issue involved in this situation.

Jesus' response to the man not only included an insult but also some wordplay. The Greek word used for "divider", *merisites*, is rare. Indeed this is the only time it is used in the New Testament. A much more common word is *mesites*, which means "reconciler". Jesus rejects the role of a divider; he has come to reconcile humanity with God and people with each other.

In the parable itself, the key phrase is in verses 17 - 19. The rich man does not go to family and friends to discuss his problem, which is what would have normally been expected. He has this conversation with himself! He doesn't experience the pleasure of talking with other people, with relating to people who cared about him. He doesn't have other people in his life. This is unheard of in Middle Eastern culture. The rich fool may be wealthy in "things" but in that which truly matters, he is absolutely destitute.

The point is made again in the following statements. The man decides by himself how he will solve his problems. No one shares that process with him. He is then told that he will die. He has accumulated great wealth but not only can he not “take it with him”, he has no one to inherit all that he amassed. He has no family - he doesn't even have any friends - to whom he can leave his possessions. “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Most of us have seen families ripped apart by squabbling over the possessions of a family member who has died. That is what is happening in this passage. The man who is calling out to Jesus is worried about “things”. Jesus is telling him that in his concern over possessions, the man is about to lose a far greater treasure: his relationship with his brother. The true wealth on earth is not found in a bank or on Wall Street; it is the people who are in our lives. Our family and our friends are priceless.