

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
July 31, 2016.
Luke 12:13-21
Moving beyond Right and Wrong

In today's gospel reading we heard Jesus say, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" Wow! If Jesus isn't prepared to judge, and if Jesus is Divine, then what does this mean? This sentence alone could take up a whole year of sermons because it challenges our whole way of thinking. So often we look to God to judge and yet today we hear that this is not the role God wants. God wants something different; and that thing is our commitment to living a new kind of life – one free of the trappings of our small mind. We are to become the bigger selves we were created to be. So that while we live fully while we are on the earth, we are constantly aware of the reality beyond this life. That love, freedom and life extend beyond our limited time on earth; that the way we live changes God's creation and that there are traps we must be careful to avoid.

Paul, in today's reading from Colossians says, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." In other words, take the high road. As Jesus says to the young man in the gospel reading today. Beware - Don't get caught up in greed, competition, or fear. Go for freedom and love. *That's* where there's abundance of life.

Each of us has our own work to do; our own journey to make while here on earth. But if we end up making our goal the

accumulation of wealth, power, and possessions, we all know where that's going to end. Pretty much on our death bed. But the effect of our lives on others may continue....

I remember Laurence Rockefeller speaking to a group of people working for non profit organizations who were recipients of his philanthropy. He said, with some amazement, "I'm in my seventies, and it's occurred to me that I can't take my wealth with me when I die, so I've decided to fund projects that I think are important." I think most people realize that the things of this earth are ours for a limited time. And the parable Jesus tells is pretty self explanatory. Why hoard for a life that is not yours to begin with? Your life belongs to and with God. Make that the focus of your life. And how do we do this?

We only have to refer back to our gospel reading from last Sunday where Jesus is asked by his disciples how to pray and he gives them the structure for the Lord's Prayer in which we say, all these hundreds of years later, "Give us this day, our daily bread." Our daily bread. The sustenance we need for this day – because we can't eat for tomorrow. But more than this, our daily bread can mean the lessons the challenges and blessings we receive for this one unique day. What are we encouraged to learn for this day; how are we being asked to grow in wisdom?

The young man in today's gospel reading asks Jesus to get involved in a family feud – the settling of an inheritance. This is one of life's challenges that is full of the potential for great damage to family relations. Jesus refuses to get pulled in; and instead, points to the

lesson we all need to learn. Don't be tempted by material gain; keep your eyes on what's important. We want to think there are simple solutions. We want someone to make the decision for us – to take the heat. But that's not what the spiritual life is all about.

We are called by Jesus to do our own personal work to learn how to get along with others and how live according to the gospel message. We sidestep our work by wanting someone else to make a judgment in our favour. Because relationships suffer. One person wins and one person loses. Of course, there's a place for legal decisions but those are few and specific. Jesus calls us to something much more challenging and rewarding. The working out of relationships through love, vulnerability and humility.

I love the story of the couple, in the midst of a marital dispute who seek out the rabbi to ask for his judgment in the matter. The husband launches in and tells his side of the story. Without hesitation, the rabbi says, "You are right." "Wait a minute," the wife protests, "You haven't heard my side of the story." So the rabbi listens to her and says, "You're right." The husband is confused and says, "But Rabbi, how can we both be right? She's right and I'm right?" The rabbi smiled at him and said, "You're right."

In every situation, we bring our past experiences, our unmet needs and our judgments to bear so we each see life differently. We also have our own unique lessons to learn, so our response, or reaction to each situation, will be informed by who we are.

Jesus knew that the young man who was desperate to get his share of the inheritance had his own lesson to learn. And I'm guessing Jesus saw into the man's heart and said, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Or again, as Paul said, "Keep your mind on higher things; because your life is hidden with Christ in God." Your life is not in winning, or gaining, or being right. Those are temporary things that pit person against person.

Perhaps in this case, Jesus was inviting the young man to free himself of a greed that enslaved him. Who knows exactly. But it does seem clear that Jesus saw into the man's soul, and knew where the spiritual dangers lay for him. Jesus completely avoided taking sides. He spoke to the reality for that particular man and his needs on the spiritual path.

I think of a couple for whom a priest friend of mine performed the wedding. Both had had abusive childhoods. They were in love and my friend counseled them that they had the potential to create a loving home within which to help each other heal from the hurts of their past. But that they would need a lot of support and they needed to think about, and talk about, how they would build this into their marriage. He warned them to beware the negative patterns of their past. Well, it didn't take long for the patterns of their pasts to invade their current life. Instead of spending their time, money and energy on their relationship, they became consumers living beyond their means focused on accumulating stuff and creating a lifestyle that

looked great on the outside but that was rotten on the inside. And suddenly they woke up to the reality that they fallen into the patterns of their childhood; where one spouse was aggressive and violent; the other, passively a victim. The marriage that had had the potential of healing, freedom and love, became a hell. Each had their own lesson to learn, their own unique contribution to make. Who is right? Who is wrong? Today one of the couple is in denial, blaming the other for everything; asking others to back up his point of view. The other spouse is valiantly trying to assert herself, as she struggles to claim her self esteem and respect.

Our world needs to move beyond right/wrong thinking if we are ever going to assist God in creating God's kingdom on earth. For sure, we need to discern which behaviours are life-serving and which ones aren't. But too often, we forget our place and want to assert ourselves as right and good and better than others. In essence, arguing as the disciples did, who would be first and who would be seated on the right or left hand of Jesus as he assumed what they believed would be his earthly kingdom.

It is not our place to judge others. If God doesn't want to judge, then why are we so anxious to?

For a long time, I've imagined this scenario at Heaven's Gate. When I arrive, anxious to be accepted, I ask, "Did I do good? Was I right most of the time?" Peter will answer, gently, lovingly, but pretty directly, "Well, you did pretty well, but what about the times you were more interested in being right than in building bridges, or in

fueling rather than diffusing a fight, or in letting go in the interest of peace? After all, we gave you all sorts of role models, examples, parables, communication experts.” And then his face will sadden, “Did you really think things would be resolved up here in heaven when you had everything you needed to do so down there on earth?”

Someone once told me, do you want to be right, or do you want to be in relationship? I know that feeling – of constricting in self righteousness and asserting my position only to moments later become aware of the hurt in the other person’s face. It’s not worth it.

Everyone has their perspective, their experience, their needs and we can only think we’re right when we don’t take the time to listen to others and to try and understand them. Listening with the desire to understand breaks down walls and opens hearts. It’s challenging but very rewarding work, and it takes effort and intention. But it is the kind of work that changes the world and creates openings for God to work through.

Jesus was killed by well meaning people who thought they were right. So we would do well to listen to him when he tells us that he can’t do our relationships for us. We need to do them with the grace God, and with of the grace of God, with each other, learning as we go. We need to beware of our tendencies to grasp, hoard, deny, and self assert. Of our incessant desire to be right, to look good, to get others to take our side.

And we need to stumble along with open hearts and willing souls to do the holy work that has nothing to do with right/wrong

judgments and everything to do with holy, messy love. And in allowing our daily bread to transform us into the “new self” Paul refers to.

Right or wrong, we are loved by God. And asked to love others as we are loved. What an incredible awesome message, worthy to be shared with all we meet. Thanks be to God.

Amen.