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Propers 13 (Pentecost 11) Series C 2016

Phillip L. Brandt

Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 31

There is a strange symmetry to the Ten Commandments which I have always found attractive. Luther famously said that the first commandment was the key. If you kept that commandment you kept them all, and if you broke any of the other commandments, you first had to have broken the first commandment. It is wise and it is true. But there is another interesting way to run with this, and it works backwards. The ninth/tenth commandments are also in a way a governing commandment which affects the rest of them. Any breaking or keeping of the other commandments usually starts with the ninth/tenth commandments.

Disputes over enumeration and intrude here, so let me quickly talk about this. The Hebrew OT refers to the Ten Commandments as the ten “dabrim” or words. This is term which has about the same meaning as the Greek “logos.” Usually dabar (singular) and dabrim (plural) is translated simply as word/words, but the term encompasses “ideas” “items” “things” “concepts” and much more.

The hard thing for us is that the text never actually affixes a number to any of the commandments other than to say that there are ten of them. It never says that this is the first or the seventh, etc. The problem is that a clear reading of the text has everyone coming up with only nine commandments. I have long held that the first “dabar” is not a command at all, but is the statement “I am the LORD, your God, who brought up out of Egypt.” The first dabar is a statement of faith.

But so far I have not had much luck convincing the rest of Christendom to follow me. They insist on having ten commands, so they all split one to make ten. The longest standing tradition, which has roots in Judaism and the earliest days of Christianity is to split the last commandment and make two coveting commandments. This is how you will find them in the catechism. This is also how the Catholics and Orthodox enumerate them. And that accounts for about 90% of Christianity

Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin who were of a mind to throw out all that smacked of Catholicism in the sixteenth century renumbered the commandments and split the first commandment instead, thus enumerating a commandment which prohibited graven images. This is why there are no statues in most protestant churches. Most North American Protestants follow this enumeration. All this has created a great deal of confusion among the lay folk and a needless finger pointing and name calling when Lutherans/Catholics sit down to dinner with their Baptist cousins. No one is really sure about this.

The other issue comes in the delineation of the first and second table/tablet of the Law. Does the commandment to honor parents belong in the first table which references God or does it belong in the second table which references how we love our neighbor as ourselves? I tend to put it in the first table because I see parents as God’s representatives, and thus to honor them is to honor

him. Others however speak of this as the first element in the second table of the Law which deals with the love of neighbor.

Now to the texts at hand: Jesus today enjoins us not to covet. But if we would hear that, we really need to spend a little time with that commandment and even just that word: Covet. If you look at the second table of the law, it starts with murder and human life. Then to the most important relationship any one will ever know, marriage and ultimately family. The seventh commandment turns to possessions and the eighth commandment turns to reputation, or what folks are saying about you. You can easily think of this as concentric circles of importance to the neighbor. First his own life, then family, then things, then reputation. The last commandments, however, take it a little far afield of that and bring it right into my own heart. These commandments focus on my attitude toward my neighbor, and his spouse, things, and reputation.

Coveting: When I want something so badly it affects my relationship with the person who has that thing. Coveting sours the relationship with another person. I don't steal the thing but I really cannot abide with them having it and I do not, so I will go out of my way to make them miserable. Coveting puts my heart in the wrong direction. We can covet not only things, but also people, relationships, opportunities, and a whole host of things.

I think, when we get to that last commandment, we really confuse it with stealing. We envision the covetous person as someone who is fixated on getting his neighbor's car or money or something like that. We equate coveting with some sort of a strong desire which almost possesses a person. Our image of coveting seems exclusively to involve a person who is consumed with jealousy. This is indeed a form of coveting, but it is a little like murder, the extreme form of breaking the commandment. Luther would have us think that simply harming our neighbor, calling her a name, even failing to help him in some minor bodily need is breaking that fifth commandment. In a parallel, we might ask just what is coveting-lite? Just as most of us are not murderers, but we break that fifth commandment regularly, how do we break the coveting command without descending to the depraved depths of green-eyed covetousness?

When I taught this to my confirmation students I always asked how we broke the commandment and how we kept it. Thus murder is breaking the fifth commandment, but helping my neighbor in all his bodily needs is keeping the commandment. To do this with the ninth/tenth commandments, we have to have an antonym for covet. What is the opposite of covet? I have never really found a word for it, but this is the way that I think of it. Coveting is when I would take my neighbor's pleasure from him or when I would rejoice in his suffering. Keeping this commandment, then, is weeping when my neighbor weeps and rejoicing when my neighbor has joy. We suggested "content" as the antonym of covet. Does that work? It will need some framing. We are content with what God has given. Sometimes contentment is cast as the opposite of any ambition.

An example I have used before: A few years ago my neighbor's business was doing very well. He bought, for his wife, on the occasion of her birthday, a brand new Volvo. It is a beautiful car.

There is nothing wrong with admiring my neighbor's car and even wishing that I had the cash to buy one like it. So far, in this illustration, I have not coveted his car. But I am close. If I start to resent that my neighbor can do this and if I walk over to my neighbor and tell him that I read in consumer reports or saw on the news that this model had some problems, just so I can make myself feel a little better or make him feel a little worse, then I think I have a coveting problem. I have not tried to take his car, I have even told myself that I don't want his car, but I have not let him enjoy it. If I go over there and ask him how much he paid with the sole intention of telling him that he could have gotten a better deal somewhere else, I have a coveting issue. I am not taking his car, that would be the seventh commandment, but I am stealing his joy at having it. I am not rejoicing with him in the purchase of this beautiful machine.

It works the other way too. A few months after his bought his wife the car, I noticed that the white Honda sedan which his 18 year old son was driving was parked in the drive way with a crumpled front fender. Like many teens, the young man had been in an accident. No one was hurt, but that fender was pretty well crushed. Here presented another occasion. What would I do when I saw my neighbor's car with a crushed fender? Would I laugh into my coffee mug every morning when I looked out my window? If I did, I have a coveting problem.

Keeping the coveting commandments means that when my neighbor rejoices, I rejoice with him. And when he is sorrowful, I am sorrowful with him. When I get those two things backwards, I have a coveting problem. Thus, if I cannot bear that my neighbor has done well and would steal away his good workers, or find some legal way to get his resources (perhaps filing a law suit or simply threatening a law suit) I have a problem with these commandments. When I want to further my fortunes at expense of my neighbor, because I want to get ahead and I don't really care about him, I have a coveting problem. How much of capitalism is actually built on breaking this commandment? I think it is fine and good to make a profit on one's work, ideas, or skill. But it can easily slip into something else. Another place I regularly find coveting issues is in the competitive athletics. Do I rejoice when the slugger on the division leading team pulls his hamstring, allowing my team to advance?

The ninth and tenth commandments suggest that my neighbor has a right to expect that I will be favorably disposed and charitable toward him in all my dealings. I will have his happiness as a goal, and seek to avoid giving him sorrow. I will pray for him in danger and will celebrate with him on the day of his joy.

It sounds easy, but it is not. How much of our humor is not based on laughing at the errors and pratfalls of another? How often don't we live the "dog eat dog" or "rat race" world in which we succeed by climbing over the back of another human being? How easy it is to talk only about myself, and be bored with the news my neighbor has to share? How easy it is to be shown his new television or her new clothes only to find something wrong, and thus to spoil his joy. How easy it is to laugh into my coffee every time I see that fender on my neighbor's car, even though it has been fixed for some time.

Three years ago we wondered if it is possible to watch television and keep this commandment. It seems that the advertisements were all feeding a sense of discontent. They appeal to an inner animal which is always striving for more. Is that inner animal really our broken human nature? You might use commercials like the Old Spice, Carl's Jr. or others as an example. They have nothing to do with the product, they are really effective because they appeal to this old human being who is never satisfied with what we are or what we are doing.

We also thought that breaking this commandment fundamentally distracts us from God as the center of our universe. It places me squarely in the center of all things. My needs, my desires, my safety, security, etc., become the most important thing. This of course brings us right back to the first commandment. They are intricately connected. To break one commandment is to break them all in a sense.

Jesus, rooting us in a relationship of trust and love, points us to a totally different way of living. This is his life, a life which has God at the middle of the picture and which does not need to find joy in the comparison of my life with my neighbor's life. It is a better life than my old life, but the old Adam in me just cannot see it. He aches to make himself feel better by telling my neighbor that the Volvo model he purchased has had a number of consumer complaints.

The key to keeping the ninth/tenth commandment: Jesus. In the incarnation, He is "coming along side us," rejoicing with us, sorrowing with us, and empowering us to live out this commandment fully with his righteousness at work in us. He raises us from the death of our sins and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism he now works powerfully within us. As Paul says in Colossians – Christ is in us.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, grant us wisdom to recognize the treasures You have stored up for us in heaven, that we may never despair but always rejoice and be thankful for the riches of Your grace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Wisdom to recognize a treasure in heaven...I wonder what such wisdom looks like or how we would know we have it. I suppose if one has this, one is wise to it, but if you don't, I imagine feeling rather vulnerable when I speak this prayer. And what are the treasures in heaven I am to recognize. I almost am loathe to ask the question. Surely everyone else can recognize them, but if I ask it, do I betray the fact that I don't have this wisdom?

The prayer seems to base the discussion of covetousness on faith, a proper place for it to be. The person who believes the promises of Jesus, who trusts him, in fact has no need for covetousness. But I wonder if the prayer is not a little naïve or perhaps we also misunderstand faith itself. I know that Jesus has given me a treasure in heaven, but I still struggle with coveting as do many folks. Knowing about the treasure is different than trusting it. There is more to this "recognition" than simply acknowledging that it is there. Faith is not a box I check off in my

spiritual inventory. Faith permeates and comprises the whole of the Christian life. The love, joy, peace, and other elements which we associate with such a life are more the evidence of faith than things unto themselves. Is that a dangerous way to look at that?

This brings us to a very important distinction about faith which Luther made. It is one thing to stand on the docks and say that this ship is bound for New York. I can know that this is so, but that is not yet really “faith” in it. It is quite another to purchase a ticket and entrust your life to that captain, his crew, and the ship I see before me. That requires a measure of trust that they are not deceiving me, that they are competent to keep that promise, and that they will actually deliver me to that destination.

To say that God is in heaven, that he has given us a place there, is one thing, but to entrust one’s life to that reality is quite another thing. People often suggest that “faith” is a cop-out or somehow it is “easier” than a life of rational, thoughtful, self-controlled living. But that is not so. Trusting God is not the easy way out, nor is it somehow abandoning rational or difficult decisions. In truth, some of the decisions get harder and the morality gets murkier. Right now I am studying the resistance of the Lutherans in Magdeburg, Germany during the “Interim” which was when the Holy Roman Emperor tried to re-impose Catholicism on Saxony. He had won a battle but ended up losing the war both on the battle fields and in the hearts/minds of the Saxons. The Lutherans in Magdeburg resisted these efforts, to point of enduring a siege by the armies of the empire. We tend to hail them as heroes who eventually prevailed. That narrative is good and has merit, but for the pastors and people of Magdeburg it was never so clear. Were they transgressing God’s word in Romans 13? Should they have trusted that God would do something to save them? Did they take their salvation into their own hands?

I think of when I considered calls to other congregations. When considering a new position in another state, trusting a promise from God to take care of you means that you don’t make this decision based solely on the money. If you trust God to care for you, and you really trust that, then you are asking a much more complex set of questions than if you believe that you alone are supposed to be taking care of yourself. You are part of a family, you are woven into a skein of relationships. This is not clear-cut and cannot be made on the basis one or two criteria.

Which brings me back to this prayer: I am not sure that the word “recognize” is the best, especially as we use it today. We tend to see recognition as a mental activity, but this is far more faith-related, far more relational. It is not about a set of facts in my head as much as it is about a relationship with God.

The result of the relationship in which the treasures are already given is one of thankfulness and joy. Having just come off a convention and the outpouring of yellow journalism which always accompanies that, I am not sure that “thankfulness” and “joy” are the adjectives that spring to mind. Is that in fact a faith issue? Is our failure to live in such thankful joy a symptom of faith problems as much as issues of doctrinal purity, wise polity, and missionary zeal which seem to exercise us at such events?

Readings

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26 (*I have included two entire chapters of Solomon's treatise on the good life here. While the reading directs us to some important thoughts out of this material, the logic and the imagery of the omitted verses is instructive for the preacher and for the 21st century Christian. The actual reading in your bulletin inserts will be in regular font.*)

¹ *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

² *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

³ *What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?*

⁴ *A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

⁵ *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

⁶ *The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.*

⁷ *All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.*

⁸ *All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.*

⁹ *What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.*

¹⁰ *Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?*

*It has been already
in the ages before us.*

¹¹ *There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.*

¹² I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" ³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. ¹⁶ For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ For all his

days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Solomon in his old age writes these words with his eyes fixed firmly on both his own past and the future which lies before him. The book of Ecclesiastes is really a treatise on the good life, a sort of thing which the ancients regularly thought about, but which has fallen out of vogue since Immanuel Kant’s endeavor to find the “right thing” to do instead of the good thing. Of course, Kant thought they were the same thing, but experience has shown that they are not exactly the same thing. In Ecclesiastes Solomon runs through all the various options for finding happiness, meaning, and purpose in life and he finds all of them lacking. Everything “under the sun” is meaningless. It is not until you get to chapter 12 that he starts talking about what is not under the sun, but beyond it, the real meaning of life. This is a perfect text to broach the subject of covetousness.

Solomon was one of those larger than life characters we see every so often. When he went down a possible path of life, he always went much farther down that path than any of us would ever dream of journeying. When he considers an Epicurean sort of philosophy which finds happiness only in pleasure, Solomon goes wholly into this. He builds a harem of 1000 women. But this life he finds is meaningless. When he wonders if doing great deeds is the secret to real meaning in life, he builds cities, creates a trading empire, and more, and yet he finds this too is meaningless. Where most people who go through a midlife crisis might foolishly buy a sports car or worse, have an affair, Solomon will take his multiple mid-life crises right over the top. How did one man have that much energy? I have no idea.

But it is all meaningless. Solomon says here that the human being can find nothing better than to do his job, eat his bread, and find satisfaction in those simple pleasures. This is from the hand of

God. Solomon for all his wisdom, power, and wealth seems to be looking at the gardener who is pulling weeds in the palace garden with a measure of envy. This guy whose life is so simple may be happier than the high and mighty king. Solomon wishes he could push a wheelbarrow and whistle, head home after a day's labor to the simple pleasures of a simple home.

But Solomon is no romantic who pines away for this imagined simple life, like so many do today and which wise people know is not really so simple. Such sentimentality doesn't look closely enough at the subject matter it idealizes. Have the guy actually clean out a horse stable and he might not be so envious of the stable hand. Solomon is not such a romantic. He looks at the simple life and sees a gift from God, the same gift that God might also give to his complicated life. He too, as King, might find his satisfaction in the bread he has and the work which he does. God is that sort of a gift giver.

Solomon points out in these verses one of the really frustrating elements of his success. He must give his hard earned wealth and work to a son who has not worked for it and might well be a fool. Indeed, his heir was Rehoboam, and he was a fool. He lost the northern portion of his kingdom within moments of his coronation. A financial advisor once advised me that the average inheritance lasted only days before it was all spent. It is meaningless. It does not last. Such significance cannot be had anywhere other than God.

The preacher will want to ask who do our people aspire to be like. Who are our heroes in running the human race? Warren Buffet has made millions and still lives simply in the family home in Omaha. His money has not changed him. Lottery winners are poor models here. Many lottery winners actually find that they have come to a terrible curse in winning. Their winnings have not made them happy, but often ruined their lives. Do our parishioners aspire to be like some humanitarian like Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King? Is Jesus their model? What does that look like?

Psalm 100

¹ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

² Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!

³ Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!

Give thanks to him; bless his name!

⁵ For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Just a word of pastoral encouragement: When I was six years old I was in a small Lutheran school. In fact, it was so small that my first grade class consisted of two students, Christy Clark and myself. We were both pretty good readers, so my father had us stand up in church one Sunday and read this Psalm responsively as part of the service.

I don't remember much about my first grade year, but. I remember that day very clearly. Mrs. Meyer was a good teacher and I remember her fondly, but it was a long time ago. Thus, while I can tell you almost nothing of that year in school, I cannot read these words without remembering that Christy and I read this responsively before the whole congregation. It left a very positive and lasting image on my life and these words remain precious to me. My father gave me a gift that day which I will cherish all my life. When I am on my death bed, I hope the preacher reads these words to me.

Summer and fall are great times to involve children in your worship.

Colossians 3:1-11 I have also included some additional verses at the end of the reading. Our North American Protestant milieu would have us overly spiritualize these words and so I wanted Paul's own words to bring us back down to earth. Heavenly things are not heavenly because they are somewhere else, but because they are connected to God and right in front of us right now.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to

God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

While the Epistle readings do not normally coincide with the Gospel readings, this time it really does. Paul is addressing the Greek ideas about the physical world. He enjoins us to have our minds on heavenly things, which sounds very platonic, until you get to the rest of the paragraph. Paul is not speaking of having our heads in the clouds, thinking of things that are not on earth, but he has in mind that we think about the things which are on earth as things of heaven. In other words, he is not an escapist who is only looking ahead to heaven, but very much a realist. He thinks Jesus is really all and in all.

The first paragraph is what throws most folks for a loop on this, and you will want to treat this carefully. It sounds so much like Paul is speaking about a Christianity which is focused on the afterlife and ethereal things. But Paul is trying to co-opt the language of his opponents in this and does it so well that we are still fooled by it.

The second paragraph and that which follows are the key to this. Paul insists that heavenly things have to do with our relationships, our possessions, our speech, and our physical life. We put to death the worldly things, and live in those relationships and possessions differently. We have put on a new self which is remade in the image of its creator, Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter who shed his blood for us. In this world, and this is huge for Paul, there is no more of this distinction of race. In the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin racial tensions, Christianity has something great to say. Why are we so silent? We are all running the human race, no matter what color or nationality we claim or which language is our native tongue. Christ is all and in all.

For Paul, the incarnation of Jesus changes everything. All things have been reconciled (chapter 1) and now Christ is everything and in everything. They are all heavenly things now. We keep our mind on the heavenly things, but those things are not distant from us, but right here, right in front of us. The heavenly things are present in our relationships, our bank accounts, our garages and our closets. As I write these words to you, I have paint on my fingers from a little remodeling project at my house. A heavenly thing, because this house is a gift from God, the money I used to buy the paint was a gift from God, the time I spend is a gift from God, and it is not wasted with my shoulders crammed into that little closet painting. It is a God pleasing thing to take care of my house and provide for my family. It is a heavenly thing.

In prior readings we noticed the tenses of the verbs as we discussed this. The Christian “is being made in the image of the creator” It is a work in progress. The Lord who will appear also means that we will appear, though now we cannot see him that way, we also cannot see ourselves or each other that way either, but must believe, trust. Christ is all, and is in all! I cannot see that

right now, but on that day when he brings to completion the work he has begun in every Baptized Christian, we will see Christ is all and in all. Right now, I believe it, I walk by faith and he is working toward that day in my life. This means the last day is not the coming of something new, but the revealing of what has been there all along. The Christian life simply lives in the present reality which the world cannot see. We are not living in anticipation of something we do not now have, but we live in the reality which is current, but which the world cannot perceive and thus we look strange. I think of it as someone who is walking along with a small Bluetooth device in her ear. To someone who cannot see the earpiece, she looks like another delusional schizophrenic. But what she is doing makes complete sense in light of that ear piece. The conversation she is conducting is rational. So too the Christian who cares for the dying old man is living in a different reality. He is not just a dying old man; he is a child of God, an eternal life who is this day in some need which I can supply.

Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” ¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Someone asks Jesus to be the arbiter in a probate case. A man has died and an elder son is not dividing the inheritance according to tradition. We don't know how often things like this happened in the ancient world. The laws which govern this were just starting to be written and formulated. The Romans were quite advanced in their laws, but they really did not involve themselves in these sorts of things among non-citizens in the provinces and even they had a considerable distance to travel before they would be recognizable to us. Justinian's legal reforms upon which much of western law is still based were still 500 years in the future. The Jews had strong traditions, but money has a strange way of making people do unusual things. It looks to many readers, based on this text, that the Jews operated a sort of arbitration system, in which both parties would submit to the decision of a third party.

Jesus refuses. He is not a judge or arbiter. But he is a prophet and a preacher. He warns those around him to beware covetousness. A man's life does not consist in the things he owns. And then he tells them a parable, a word of wisdom which could have come right out of Ecclesiastes,

but then again, that should not surprise us since this is the Word we are talking about here and the inspiration for Solomon as well.

The verses which immediately precede this are filled with tension. Jesus has been speaking harsh words against the scribes and Pharisees. The eleventh chapter ends with them looking for a way to trap him and move against him. The plot of Luke's Gospel thickens and moves closer to the cross. All of this is couched in the context of an exorcism and the accusation of the Pharisees that Jesus is possessed of a demon. It is very tense.

In the midst of that tension, Jesus introduces another tension point this word on money and possessions. This is spoken right into the face of his contemporary Jewish culture. It would appear that Judaism of the first century really saw wealth and material success as a sign of God's blessing and often used it as a measuring stick. The disciples are amazed at Jesus words about a camel and a needle in reference to a rich man entering heaven in Luke 18. It seems they are also putting wealth on a scale of blessing and consider the poor man be simply cursed by God, probably not eligible for the kingdom of God. Certainly the rich man is a good man otherwise God would not have blessed him.

Jesus upends this idea, because while indeed money and material possessions can be a blessing from God, they are in no way a measure of God's love. In truth, wicked men can be quite wealthy, good and pious folk can be very poor. This is not new in the first century, but, like every century, it runs counter to intuition and there were powerful voices which spoke another narrative of life based in success and wealth.

This plays into the story Luke tells by creating tension, the tension that will by the end of the book have Jesus dying on a cross and put him into the tomb from which he rises. For us, however, this is serving a different purpose. The readings come immediately after the words on prayer, and prior to that the extended conversation we have heard about the definition of faith and our relationship to God. In that relationship we were told that our own contributions are nil, but Jesus has filled us with the Spirit and made us important players in the work of God's Kingdom. We are utterly dependent upon God, he has rescued us from Sin, Death, and Devil. Last week we heard of God's fatherly heart which listens to our prayers.

This week we hear how the things of this life fit into that life of faith. We are given to trust in God. Indeed material possessions are a blessing from God, and he makes them what they are, the sustenance of this life. Without him, they will not satisfy, indeed, we cannot say that we own them. When we die, they remain here, useless to us. Our life does not consist in having lots of stuff, but in having God. With God, the stuff takes on a totally different meaning, without Him, it is our prison and death. With him, it is a blessing and life.

The preacher of this parable will want to ask what it looks like to be rich toward God. What does it mean that our lives are lived in the light of Christ? In the 13th century that came to mean something which was often called the "apostolic life" of austere and voluntary poverty. Francis

of Assisi was a hero for turning his back upon the considerable wealth of his parents. His and other similar voluntary beggars would inspire Thomas Aquinas to stubbornly resist his wealthy family's attempts to entice him out of the mendicant order of Preachers (Dominicans) into a much more respectable order such as the Benedictines whose abbots could be quite wealthy.

20th century American politicians urged us to pursue the American dream: a good spouse, a good job, a house in the suburbs, 2.8 children, and, if you needed a little spice in life, a car with a very large engine. That ideal is being challenged, at least in the city in which I live. The hipsters won't learn how to drive, perhaps live communally, and pursue very different ideas about what a good life looks like for them. I read an article today asking "when will they grow up?" but I think the premise of the article was mistaken. The house in the suburbs and the sort of life which their parents knew does not seem like the good life to them. I think this divide presents us with an opportunity to preach on this.

What is the properly, healthily ordered life today? What is the good life? What is rich toward God? Is it keeping the first commandment? Or is it the ninth/tenth commandment? That seems to resonate as much with this parable. Is it faith? So having faith now I am rich? Is that the way that it works? What would have been different about the wealthy farmer in the parable had he been rich toward God? Would he have fed the hungry? Would he have done some good work? But isn't that just another sort of works righteousness?

The key to whether he is rich or poor toward God seems to be the focus of the man. He has no time for God in his labor or in his retirement. Perhaps the problem is that he waits until he has the things before he believes he can be happy. He could have been happy all along. Why does he wait? He does not derive his happiness from God, but from things. This is the problem. His wealth was not a problem, nor his plans to build bigger barns. His problem was that he imagined that this meant he is now able to be happy. The stuff was never his, it was always a gift from God, when he had a little and when he had much. But he had "owned" it and now that his heart was about to give out, all the possessions could not really help him. He would die and the thing into which he had invested his life would be left to another. He was therefore a fool in our Lord's eyes.

Thus the wise man will indeed feed the hungry, build an orphanage, or do the good things. But he won't do it as another sort of investment scheme in which he will simply reap a delayed reward on the day of his death. He will do the good things because God has done good to him. He cannot earn more points with God, he has already got them all. Everything he has and is has come from God. It is all gift. That will be the motive for building the orphanage. To build the orphanage to earn points with God is in Solomon's words "vanity." It is a chasing after the wind. God's favor is not for sale that way, but it is freely given. The fool in the parable imagined that he had to earn the riches, whether they be earthly or heavenly riches. But the real riches are not for sale.

Law and Gospel

1. God asserts and ownership of his whole creation. Which is right, but I hate it. It seems obvious that my security, my well-being, and my future all depend upon my ability to control these resources and he claims them. But God does not assert his claim with violence, at least not violence perpetrated against me. He asserts his claim in the violent death of his only begotten and beloved Son, Jesus Christ. When he took on flesh, he owned the whole of this creation. He takes his rightful place at the center of my life, the guarantor of my future, my well-being, and my security.
2. Death mocks my attempts at owning things. It rips them from my hands and gives them to others so that it may simply rip them from their hands another day. Weak, naked, helpless, and penniless, I am ushered from this world against my will. But Jesus has traversed that gloomy portal already. I am ushered from this world with nothing but to receive from his hands treasures far greater than anything that Bill Gates has amassed here on earth.
3. But heaven seems so far away, I have a tough time seeing that, and my possessions are so close and so real to me. It is so natural and normal to use them to measure my worth and my success. The world does it and my old nature wants to do so as well, especially if my house and car and income compare favorably with my neighbor's. But God has a completely different measuring stick by which I have been found blessed. That measuring stick is none other than Jesus himself and the blood he shed on Calvary for me. Heaven has come to us.
4. I like to compare myself to others, mostly because I am able to convince myself that I am really better. My neighbor may have more money than I do, but I am smarter than he is. He may be successful, but I take my comfort in realizing that he is a cheat. I like to laugh into my coffee cup when I see that dent in the car which sits in his driveway. I am at my heart a sick person. The forgiveness which Jesus has worked in his life and death and resurrection is not only a removal of that guilt, but also the reformation of my very self. He has given me his right-ness and in some way that takes shape in my life.

Sermon Ideas

1. Life consists in...God (based on the Gospel lesson – That the hearer find meaning and joy in God – using the things of this world to enjoy Him as they are His gifts to us, freely bestowed.)

This sermon will not tell the rich man that it is a sin to be rich or that it is better to be poor. The sermon needs to remember the very Augustinian idea that the things of this

world don't get between me and God, but they are the very means by which I can enjoy God.

This sermon will reorient the human being toward the things of this life, the possessions, the people, the relationships, and all that comprises our world. The world wants us to see those things as a game in which there are winners and losers. Some of us have more and some have less, and the world wants us to measure that carefully and establish where we fit in. This text and hence this sermon wants to upend that sort of thinking and acting. It starts with the beautiful truth of our baptism and the eternal life which God has given us there, a heavenly treasure (see Collect).

The foolishness of the rich man seems to be that he waited to enjoy his things. He thought that he had to have so much before he could enjoy them. But Solomon said that the man who finds joy in his labor and bread is the recipient of a gift from God. To do otherwise is vanity, wholly vanity. How does coveting fit in? Isn't coveting really striving for more and more all the time, and never satisfied with what you have, never receiving it as a gift, but always as a thing deserved/earned. Striving for more is not a bad thing, but it easily becomes an idolatry in which we are consumed with the getting instead of consuming the gift from God in thanksgiving. One might focus on the initial request – the man wants Jesus to arbitrate a probate issue. Is Jesus telling the man that he has already gotten the greater inheritance? Is Jesus asking him why he wants this thing he believes he deserves? Why should I get worked up about a great inheritance when I already have a phenomenal inheritance in my relationship to Christ?

This sermon addresses coveting and the preacher may want to address it from that angle. The parable is a potent story but it is Law. The Gospel is found elsewhere in the text, you could easily import from the OT lesson or from the Epistle as well. Solomon sees the happiness of the life lived as a gift as a great blessing from God, Paul spoke of being raised with Christ and predicating the whole of life upon that fact. The good news is that our life is not measured by the things we have but by the valuation which God has placed upon us in Christ.

Please understand, Jesus speaks inflammatory words. The people of this time regularly used the material blessings as a measure of God's love for the person. But don't we do the same? Look at the commercials which bombard us on television. Don't they establish a value for us based on the car we drive, the burger we eat, the clothes we wear, etc. The people of Jesus' day would find his words so offensive that these very people will put him on the cross which forgives their sins. Therein lies the great mystery of the text. I am not measured by the size of my checking account or my mutual fund portfolio, but by the love of God expressed in Jesus. That is measure of my life. I still have a bank account, it is a gift from God, I will use it to serve him, but it does not define me.

That changes the way that I see all the things around me. They are simply removed from the economy of my status before God and men. I may have much, I may have little, but I have the full love of God. For the Christian that means that the things of this life, whether they are much or little, are really simply the instruments for the enjoyment of God's love for me. The simple meal consumed in thanksgiving and the opulent feast received from his hand are both occasions for joy, full joy.

This has profound implications for the way that I interact with my neighbor and the rest of creation. I am no longer in some competition with them. I am freed from the need to be better or bigger or richer or more powerful or more moral. I may not demand what is "right" or what I deserve. The initial request to Jesus may have been made out of a really disordered sense of "justice" when Jesus might be asking why the man wants the money to begin with. The idea of what I have coming to me is a powerful thing in our culture. We take folks to court and sue them because they have hurt me, cheated me, etc. But is that really the very opposite of what Jesus is talking about here? This attitude really poisons the relationships I have with people. This sense of entitlement changes the way I see everyone. Jesus has freed me from that. His gracious love, in Paul's words, means we see everyone as a new creation. (II Corinthians 5)

When my neighbor experience success, I can simply be happy for them. When they suffer tragedy I may simply weep with them. But this is not the way that my old man thinks about this. He craves the measure of the man, and he wants desperately to have something he can point to which makes him better, happier, more blessed than the next guy. And when the neighbor succeeds I cannot see that but as an unfair rebuke directed at me. If my success is not readily available, the old man will create success by destroying the blessings of his neighbor or at least his neighbor's enjoyment of those blessings. He loathes the idea that someone else is happy, especially as my old Adam is a profoundly unhappy person. My neighbor's happiness is painful to the old man but sweetness to the one who lives in Christ's grace.

Thus it is terribly important that Jesus has not only taken away my sinfulness, but he has replaced it with his own righteousness. I am helpless before that old man, but he is not. He has conquered that old foe of sin and resisted every temptation. Today he has given me that right-ness in my baptism and made it possible for me keep this injunction about coveting. He can speak of this impossible task because in him, it is possible.

Jesus urges us toward a peaceful contentment with life. What does it take to make me happy? Jesus suggests that he is all you need.

2. Christ is all and is in all (based on the Epistle lesson – That the hearer would confess that in reconciling all things to himself, Jesus has fundamentally reordered the way that we experience and interact with the whole creation.)

This sermon really lays the intellectual/spiritual/theological foundation for the sermon above. The preacher will want consider his parish carefully and think about which one is better suited for the folks who are before him.

There is a horror to Platonism, the philosophical idea that this world is not important. It says that your hunger or your hurt, the sins that exist between us, the pains which afflict us, they are not real things. Reality, in the Platonist's estimation, is what happens in heaven, this earth will pass away and thus it is not terribly important.

But when I am hungry, it feels pretty important to me. When I turn my attention to my own death, that seems really, really important to me. When I am angry because you have done something to hurt me, or when it is my anniversary and I am happy, those too seem to be quite important to me.

Paul seems to be saying that they are not important and we should be focused on the heavenly things. But listen carefully to the second paragraph. The things of this world are to be set aside, the anger, the greed, the lies, and all the rest of that list. But not speech itself, nor the chair I am sitting on as I write this and the computer on which I type. These physical things are not really the things of the world, or at least they might not be. Paul tells us that in fact Christ is all and is in all. A heavenly thing is not some ethereal or other worldly thing, but a thing in which Christ is found. The opposite of Spiritual is not Physical, but is "earthly" the Christ-less thing which we might have in our hand but has no connection to Christ. The earthly person or thing is something that I might use and abuse without Christ.

You are a heavenly thing. Jesus took up residence in you on the day of your baptism. We should hold you in our minds. If you have a baptism this day, you really want to hit on the idea that this is the moment. We now see these folks differently, something has really happened. It is hidden in Christ, it is not something that we will see with these eyes, at least not yet, but the day of the appearing of Christ will reveal them to be something that God began on this day of their baptism. So too is this building, it was consecrated to worship when we built it. But so too can be all sorts of things. We set aside the greed, not the money. We set aside the lies, not speech itself. We set aside the anger and malice, not the relationships.

Paul says that on the last day Jesus will appear to us. Notice it does not say that he will come back, as if he was gone. On the last day it will not be the case that we will see something that has not been here, but our eyes will be opened and the veil ripped away so we can see the One who has been here all along. It is the appearing of Christ to which we look, not the arrival. We proclaim the real presence of Jesus, not the real absence.

So as you leave this building and make your way into the parking lot, look again at the car you find waiting for you. Christ is all and in all, even that old Dodge or Toyota which

brought you here this morning. It is a gift from him to be used for the blessing of your life. I don't need to look at the Acura parked next to me and be jealous about it. God has given me this and it is a holy thing, a heavenly thing. When it is worn out, it will be recycled and I will get a new one, another gift from Him. Christ is all, and in all.