

Pentecost 3, Year A  
May 25, 2008

RCL  
Isaiah 49:8-16a  
Psalm 131  
1 Corinthians 4:1-5  
Matthew 6:24-34

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Before preparing for this, Susan told me that the homily is meant to pull together today's readings in a more current or modern perspective than from when these were originally written, at least a couple thousand years ago. It is used to try and summarize and apply the shared meanings of these readings to our daily lives.

I'm going to talk about two words – or two related themes as I found them from the readings; judgment and wealth; these coming from Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth and the Gospel reading from Matthew.

In the Epistle, Paul writes a letter to the Church in Corinth. The letter is a response to criticism he received for the way he conducted his affairs as God's apostle. The gist is that that we, as Paul, are called by God through Christ to be both his messenger and servant in doing God's work. And as such, we need to be found trustworthy to do such important work. But when it comes to judging whether one is trustful and faithful, only the Lord can truly and accurately do that. And this is because only the Lord is capable of knowing "purposes of the heart". There are no secrets hid from Him. Only God knows the whole perspective, the big picture, which is hidden to all humans.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that no one can serve both God and wealth. And not to worry about things like what you will eat or wear, because God knows what you need and will provide it, as a result of striving for his kingdom. 'Don't worry about tomorrow, today's trouble is enough ...' he says.

First, I want to talk about the 'judgment'. We all make judgments. We all have opinions. Some of us make our judgments known openly, even loudly. There are people who are paid to make judgments in the name of entertainment. Others are more nuanced, quiet, or they keep their judgments to themselves. But I don't think I'm going out on a limb by saying that we all make judgments about what we see and hear around us. It's critical thinking, an innate part of being human. Having judgments or opinions, even strong ones, is not something inherently negative. Critical thinking is good. I sometimes cringe when I hear "judgmental" used as an insult to others, as in "they are bad because they are judgmental". It is not the process of judging, but the behavior that accompanies it, our reaction to the judgments of others and how we reveal our own judgments that is the most often the cause of the problems associated with judgment.

Wealth is another word that, depending on which of the Webster definition one uses, can have a negative connotation. Definitions of wealth include a great quantity of money and valuable possessions, or wealth can refer to all things that have monetary value. Actually the NIV or New International Version of the Bible uses the word "Money" in place of 'wealth' so that the verse says "You cannot serve both God and Money." and that is how I'm going to use it. Attention and concern towards wealth, like judgment, is not inherently a bad

thing. Money, property, tangible assets are relevant in our lives. The Church is a steward of God; the body of Christ and the Church pays attention to wealth. It uses its wealth to serve purposes of good, to serve God. But paying attention to one's wealth is different than being "master to wealth", which is specifically what Jesus warns against in Matthew. 'Serving the master of wealth' is not what God wants from us.

And this is where Paul's advice about judgment comes into play for me. In most cases, people, myself included, make judgments based on wealth. Many of our financial related decisions are based on our desire or our fear of judgment by others. That is why we consider the style of a car, the size of a diamond, and clothes that make us look attractive. And there is undoubtedly judgment upon those who lack wealth; the poor, homeless and jobless. Often our judgments are incorrect. They are presumptuous. Because unlike God, we don't know the whole picture, what is in the person's heart. Paul was criticized because people presumed that his behavior was not appropriate for an apostle of Jesus. Then, like now, people made presumptions about how others should serve God; about specifically what people should be saying, doing and not saying and not doing in the name of God. And there are at least as many differing judgments as there are denominations – at least. But what is most important is also unknown or as Paul says, "hidden in the darkness". That is the purpose of the heart, and only God can truly know that.

Further in the reading from Matthew, Jesus says, "do not worry about your life, God will provide". Like the birds, they neither sow nor reap and yet God feeds them. Like the lilies, they neither toil nor spin, yet God beautifully clothes them. Thinking through this reminded me of some of the discussions we've had at the Wednesday evening Bible Study. The Bible is full of parables and analogies. Some people, not only me, have brought up their 'judgment' that specific parables or analogies don't really work. Susan, as rector and facilitator, is very supportive, acknowledging that such judgment is OK and usually says, "well, no analogy is perfect", which is certainly true. I have to tell you that this is one of those analogies for me. Birds may not sow and reap as humans do but they do have to do something to feed. Worms don't fall from sky into their mouths. And while it's true that plants can thrive and look beautiful without toil or spin, they can also die and wither through no fault of their own due to weather or human neglect. Comparing the human experience to that of a bird or flower doesn't work for me. Certainly God loves us at least as much as the birds, but there is evidence that God does not alter natural life to save us from harm.

I don't believe that "Don't worry, God will provide" is the message Jesus meant to convey. To me, that implies a lack of responsibility for our actions – even in the narrow context of wealth, But there is another part of the verse – "*But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" So it's not as simple as "do not worry, God will provide". There is a caveat. I believe The Lord asks responsibility of us. Irresponsibility is not part of striving for the Kingdom of God, Selfishness is not an attribute of His righteousness.

The relationship between God and providing food and clothing is not a unilateral one. Like in most other relationships, there is a contract or covenant involved. If you do not fulfill your duties at work, in most cases, there will be consequences. The expectation of getting something for nothing is as unfair in the context of spirituality as it is in any other area – be it financial or emotional needs. While we cannot have a human relationship with God, as we do with our families and friends, we can and should strive for the Kingdom of God

and his righteousness – in all that we do. Not because, as a result, he will then provide for us. There is no guarantee of positive outcomes through divine intervention. The guarantee is that it's our spirits God will protect and save. There is the need for directing our own lives.

I believe living ones faith results in striving for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Living faith results in the Holy Spirit working in you to do what is just, righteousness and towards Gods will. If everyone on earth did this, there would be no more poverty, no more war, and no more sin. But that's not going to happen until the Day of Judgment. So, having said that, why worry?. It is true that, as Jesus says in Matthew, worrying will not add a single hour to your life span. As a matter fact, I think there is some concrete scientific evidence that it takes away from your life span. Worrying, like judgment, is an inherent human emotion. It's not reasonable to say "stop worrying", although I bet we all know someone who would benefit from worrying less than they do. Striving first for the kingdom, does reduce the level of worry. Because when you are doing what is just and righteous, when you sincerely have others interests at heart, when you truly are at peace with God, the things that cause anxiety, well, they still matter, but not as much as there is a added perspective. Not to mention that having faith, by its definition, results in a more positive expectation.

Susan says at the end of the each service "life is short, we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of others, make haste to be kind ..." Using your God given skills to gladden the hearts of others, being kind, unselfish – those are attributes that move you towards the Kingdom of God. I believe that God does provide. Not always what you expect, not when you want it, and sometimes ... painful lessons and yes, sometimes ... pain and suffering. But this is what being a steward of God is about. Not living in fear of or in the pursuit of human judgment. Human judgment is an inevitable part of human life. We all strive for the positive judgment at work and some may be responsible for judging others, for purposes of gaining wealth. That's life in the workplace in the world of pursuing of wealth. That's not a 'bad' pursuit in and of itself. But "strive FIRST for the kingdom of God and his righteousness ,, and HIS final judgment, and all these things will be given to you as well."

That is what the spirit is saying to me.

Thanks be to God.