

Aug 5, 2008 Year C, Tenth Sunday after Pentecost Luke 12: 13-21
 Ecclesiastes 1:12-14, 2:1-23
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Jesus told the parable of the rich fool and ended it saying "So it is (with those) ...who (lay) ...up treasure for (themselves)...and (are) not rich toward God."

We know the wisdom of being rich toward God. After all, we're here at church this morning! Being rich toward God is what our effort is. When we are rich towards God, all events and aspects of our life are put into order, into perspective.

It reminds me of that old toy of a flat case with a plexiglass cover. Under the plexiglass were scatterings of metal filings. You could take a little magnetic wand and place its point on top of the plexiglass. Zap! All the filings would order themselves to the point under the magnetic wand.

As you moved the wand around, the filings would follow. It was as if they danced together. They didn't get in each others' way. They were all attracted to the same power. They were in harmony with each other because they were drawn to the magnet.

Maybe that's a good analogy for our lives. If we want to be rich toward God we need to recognize and follow the magnetic love of our powerful God. We need to stay in touch with God and invest time and effort in staying close to God.

If we don't invest time and effort in staying close to our loving and powerful God, our Magnet-with-a-capital-M, so to speak, we're apt to be scattered, confused, and certainly disappointed. If we invest primarily in only ourself, we will have put ourself far away from the Magnet, and life is apt to be "vanity and chasing after wind".

Going back to the box of filings analogy, we could say that the filings "obey" the magnet. They are attracted to the magnet, and they stay with the magnet. They move according to the magnet.

For us to be "rich toward God", it is important for us to stay with God, to obey God, just the way in which the filings stay with and "obey" the magnet. Basically, spiritually, obeying God means to obey Christ's two commandments. The first of Christ's two commandments, of course, is

"...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30 NRSV) To really do that would be to put God first, not oneself., much as the filings simply "obey" the magnet.

To be rich toward God and stay with God as if we were magnetized to God, we would be humble before the power of God. We would accept the Lordship of Christ our Savior. We would be thankful, and when it was needed, we would be repentant. In practical terms, we would spend time with God, time in prayer, time in reading the Bible, time keeping at least one of the daily offices, time listening or being aware of God...if we want to grow rich toward God...if we want to allow ourselves to be magnetized to God, ...if we want to be connected.

Let's step back a minute and look at the rich fool. He did not honor this first of Christ's two commandments. He did not love God with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. He had no thought to return part of his fortune to God or to the temple. He made no thankful tithe.

The rich fool had no thought even of God's existence. No thought of thankfulness for his plentiful harvest. In fact, you see in today's gospel that he talked only to himself! He consulted no-one....no-one except his own soul, whom he addresses. Sometimes we too deceive ourselves in this way! It's easy to convince oneself of righteousness if we consult only oneself. But then we've moved far away from the magnet. The rich fool felt autonomous and in control. He was interested in the benefit of accumulated wealth and not in the benefit of obeying God.

To be rich toward God we need to obey the second of Christ's commandments also. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". (Mark 12:31 NRSV) Returning to the analogy of the filings in the box, we see that the filings simply fall into order in the magnetic field. There is no jumping around and competing with each other, no defensiveness, no struggle for power or self-benefit. All are equal.

Likewise, if we recognize that we are all equal in the eyes and love of God, there comes a magnetic power..a magnetic power of love in our midst.....which draws us to kindness, and to concern for other peoples' welfare. There are no divisions between us.

How did the rich fool do with Christ's second commandment? He had no thought of his fellow human beings. He had no thought to share his plenty with his laborers...no bonus for them!

Nor did he have a thought of using some of his windfall for the community's good. No thought to feed the hungry in his midst... only of more merriment, eating, and drinking for himself.

He coveted his accumulated wealth.

When one's possessions exceed one's basic needs, they ought to be used for the needy, for the benefit of the community, even the world-wide community. Christ says this over and over and over again. In sharing our plenty, we lay up for ourself treasure in heaven. In this way, we become rich toward God and stay connected with God, obeying his two loving commandments. Otherwise we remain in self-centered isolation. That's as if the filings have moved out of the box...unreachable by the magnet...just as the rich fool's covetous habits removed him from being rich toward God.

Again, returning to the analogy of the magnet and the filings, we see the filings are held securely by the magnet. When we are rich toward God we too are held close to God. We grow towards being able to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, Christ's first commandment. We too are secure in God's hold...in the power of that magnetizing love. Regardless of life's circumstances, we are secure. Here are some examples.

Regardless of her circumstance, Lillian Burdick knew this security. As she faced death, she expressed security knowing where she was going. She was rich toward God. She was connected.

Regardless of my sister's terminal cancer, my sister knows this security. She is living life well in the presence of her cancer. Because she and her husband have always lived a generous and loving life, she is rich toward God. She has invested in things which are powerful and eternal... the treasures of kindness and unselfish love and action. The richness of knowing humility and thankfulness as a child of God. She and we, her loved ones, know we share things which are eternal, and life is good.

Regardless of the circumstances of my divorce years ago, when the earth seemed to shift underneath me, I knew the security of being rich toward God and held by God. During all that, the spiritual thing which saved me was simply and repeatedly sitting with God. Connected.

Like one of the little filings with the Magnet. No verbal messages or words. Just a presence, a tangible, immovable presence...a silent strength which stays.

Returning again to the analogy of the magnet, we remember the order with which the filings fell into place in the magnetic field. No vying for position. Just equality and order. Similarly, when we are rich toward God our relationships with other people tend towards respect and regard, and it becomes a hallmark of the Christian that the Christian loves his neighbor as himself,the second of Christ's commandments.

I've seen this hallmark in the works you do. One of you has started Healthnet dental care for the needy. For years one of you has played the piano every week at St. Elizabeth's Nursing Home. For years several of you have provided monthly birthday parties at St. Elizabeth's and for years before that at the now non-existent Janesville Health Care Center. Others of you created and support Lazarus House. You help with Meals on Wheels and Adams' Breakfast Club. You teach Sunday School week after week after week. You provide church services at Rock Haven. Some of you sponsor a child in Haiti and give to their welfare. And for years we've supported one another through joyous as well as difficult times...chemotherapy, deaths, divorces, surgeries, depressions. You've visited one another in the hospital, in nursing homes. You take communion to one another.

"Rich toward God"? Loving our neighbor? I've seen it in the history of Trinity, when we have responded to the needs of the people in our city, when we have given to the least of our fellow human beings. We were one of the first churches in town to sponsor a Vietnamese or Laotian refugee family in the 1970's. At least one of you brought in Trinity's help early for the start and formation of ECHO decades ago.

Later, with other efforts, we received grants and made our rectory a shelter for a battered mother and her family. We offered masses in Spanish and taught English as a Second Language, ...when those things were needed in Janesville. One of you led the city's branch of Love, Incorporated, locating it in Ortmyer Hall. Love, Inc. helped needy children and families. More recently, for awhile, we provided space at Ortmyer for ECHO's clothing distribution, for ECHO's Christmas toy distribution, and for ECHO's monthly community meal. What's needed now? Where do we go from here? How can we again pick up the effort to continue obeying Christ's second commandment?

That's our current challenge.

In closing, let's return to the analogy of the toy with the metal filings and the magnetic wand.

The magnet makes order of the filings. God can make order in our lives. However, just as with the filings, we need to be in a position for the magnet to reach us. For the filings, that means being in the box. For us, that means staying close to God so we can be held in God's magnetic, magnanimous love. Then we can be part of the magnetic field, part of living God's love. Then we are rich toward God.

What things pull you out of the Magnet's field?
How do you get yourself back in?