

Too Much Stuff, Too Little Soul

It's good to be back at St. James Westminster Church, and this time as your new rector. Along with my wife Heather and my daughter Allison, we are delighted to be part of this parish family, and we thank you for having us. After twenty-seven years of ministry in different parts of Canada and the United States, we are back in the Province of Ontario where Heather and I went to school, met, dated and got married. We've come home at last.

Someone asked me if it was much of a sacrifice to leave beautiful Victoria to come to London. I responded that what makes a beautiful place is the people, and right now I can't imagine more beautiful people than you! It's a privilege to be your pastor.

I am deeply cognizant that as your parish priest I am called to follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd who knows and protects his sheep and calls each by name. It's a daunting task to be sure, so pray for me as I shall pray for you.

I recognize a number of faces in the congregation this morning and in time I shall remember your names – but be patient! I already count many of you as friends, especially our wardens and members of the selection committee, and I expect that over the years we shall get to know each other well, support one another in ministry, and harness our collective resources into fulfilling the mission of the church.

I know the importance of St. James Westminster in the life of the diocese and in the Anglican Church of Canada, and so I take my responsibilities as your new rector very seriously. I am humbled to follow a distinguished succession of rectors who have led this church, and especially my immediate predecessor Ken Anderson. I want to thank our outstanding interim leadership this past year –Keith Fleming, Graham Bland, Valerie Kenyon and the other clergy who have tended to the pastoral and spiritual care of our members. They, along with our music director Stephen Holowitz, our recently resigned Family Life Director Ann Teetzel De Bono and the other members of our ministry team have carried out their duties as faithful and effective servants of God.

This morning I am not in this pulpit to speak about me or my family, but to preach the gospel. So let me begin with a story.

A sixth grade teacher posed the following problem to her arithmetic class: A wealthy man dies and leaves fifty million dollars. One-fifth is to go to his wife; one-fifth is to go to his son, one-sixth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now, what does each get? After a long silence in the classroom, little Joey raised his hand. The teacher called on Joey for his answer. With complete sincerity in his voice, Joey answered, "A lawyer!"

He's probably right. Where there is a will, there is often a lawsuit.

In our gospel today, someone in the crowd listening to Jesus said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Does that sound familiar? How many families have come to grief because of a dispute about an estate? Money does that to us, doesn't it? Sometimes it happens at the time of a death, sometimes at the time of a divorce.

I once served on the arbitration committee for the San Diego Bar Association. One case, in particular, was very sad. A couple who were getting a divorce could not reach a property settlement. So they fought it out in court, piling up lawyers' fees and depleting their assets. By the time it was all over, the wife was near bankruptcy, pleading to the arbitration committee to have her lawyers' fees reduced. Instead of getting everything, she got next to nothing.

The nameless man in our gospel has just experienced the death of his father. You might think he would go to Jesus asking, "Master, how can I get over my grief at the death of my dear dad?"

No. Instead he says, "Jesus, tell my brother to give me my share of the inheritance."

And Jesus brushes the guy off. All this man wanted was his dad's stuff.

These days there is a great deal of emphasis on leaving a legacy. What do we leave behind when we die? There are parents whose legacy to their children is a good character, strong values, a desire to serve others, and faith in God. All this man left his sons was a pile of stuff and a week in court.

And apparently, the sons have learned their father's lessons well. At their father's death they struggled over who gets the goods. They don't care about mourning their father or honoring his memory. They only care about who gets the Lexus.

And Jesus couldn't care less. He doesn't give a hoot about their squabble over who gets the keys to the car. Got estate problems? Get a lawyer. That's not Jesus' concern. His only response is to tell a story about a fool with full barns and a bad heartbeat, presumably because Jesus regards all this talk about "who gets what stuff" to be foolish. The man is a fool because he invested his life in stuff that he cannot take with him. This very day he will face judgment, with the implication that he is rich in the things that pass away but poor in the things that are eternal.

Years ago when I was on retreat, I met a man who was experiencing a rebirth of faith after being away from the church for many years. He was an investment banker on Wall Street. His colleagues referred to him as having "the Midas Touch" because everything he did turned to gold. He made incredible amounts of money and by outward appearances was very successful. But as I spoke to this man, his life seemed like an utter failure. His wife had divorced him. His children hated him. He said to me, "I've been chasing all the wrong things in life, and now I am paying the price."

It's a question of priorities, isn't it? What is most important in your life? What do you live for? What is it that you are passionate about? What stirs your soul and fills you with energy? When we are on our deathbed, very few people look back on their lives and say, "I wish I had worked more hours or made more money." What we do say is, "I wish I had spent more time with my family, I wish I had been a better son or daughter to my parents, I wish I had cultivated more friends or taken more vacations, I wish I had given more of my life to God and to the causes that matter most to me."

Think about it. If we truly believe that life is simply about having more and more stuff, we are fools. Jesus tells us to invest more in eternity than in tomorrow. There are some things that last and some that don't. There are some things of absolute importance and other things of relative importance. Wisdom is to know the difference.

Many of you know this already. You didn't come here this morning seeking advice on shrewd investments from your new rector. You haven't come to church thinking that here you would receive a program on how to make yourself healthy and wealthy. No. You have come here to be with Jesus. You have come here, not primarily to get something out of him, but because you love him. Lots of folks are at their cottages this Sunday morning or in their air conditioned houses keeping cool. You are here. You are the sort who risks hearing what Jesus has to say, even when his words are tough. You have been willing to listen to him, to examine your life, to bend yourself to his will.

That's why we are in this church together, and why I am here as your new rector. I am not here to answer all your questions or to solve all your problems. I am not here to make you happy or to meet all your needs. I am certainly no miracle worker, Messiah figure, or wonder leader who can make all things perfect. Like any human being, I don't always get it right even when I think I am right.

I'm just a simple parish priest, ordained to help you know, love and serve God. I am here to help you draw closer to Jesus, to encourage you to become more Christ-centered and to equip you to become more Christ-like.

You and I are here at St. James Westminster to focus on what really matters, on what demands our energy, attention, sacrifice and commitment, on what is indispensable to us as Christians that we cannot possibly live without it.

Jesus is the reason we are here together. Through his wisdom and grace, he gives us lives worth living, and takes from us the stuff that's not worth dying for. He will give us everything we need to be faithful to him, tell us the truth even when we would rather not hear it, and help us to be his followers whatever the cost.

The good news is: we have a Savior who loves us, saves us and never gives up on us, even when we act like fools.

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Text – Luke 12:13-21

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