

Pentecost 11, Proper 13, August 4, 2013 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

When you're looking for a house – as I've been doing with Rachel for the last two years – you get to be something of a connoisseur of home construction. I've seen mistakes made during construction that you'd think even a 6 year old wouldn't make! I judge the quality in part based on my own personal scale. When we moved here in 2000 that scale was based on the way the garage was finished! Open studs with no insulation was at the bottom category, add insulation and you go up a notch! Then dry-walled and taped was the next level. Finally, dry-walled, taped, painted, and wood trim was the Cadillac version!

For the last 2 years I've developed a new scale. And I named it – you know, the way earthquakes are measured on the “Richter Scale”, and tornadoes on the Fujita Scale.” I call it “The Closet Scale”. The bigger the closets the higher the likelihood of newer, quality construction!

Now the house I grew up in had no closets at all. If you wanted somewhere to keep your clothes you bought wardrobes and chests of drawers. My house in Indiana - built in the early sixties - had a closet in each bedroom - one hanger deep, and about four feet long - I guess we had fewer clothes in those days!

Nowadays, some of the newer houses have closets the size of a small country, and they're not limited to the bedrooms. Closets in the kitchen can hold enough food to feed the 82nd Airborne Division. Closets in the entryway are big enough to hold a couple of golf-carts. One day I expect to see a closet with its own closet at the back! But wait – our new house has that!! Hopefully we can empty the various storage lockers – including the basement here – of all our extra “stuff”, and, well, stuff it into the new space!

What seems to be a priority for new construction now is room enough to store anything we want, enough to store up an abundance of stuff that'll keep us happy and contented into the distant future.

And then we can relax: eat, drink, and be merry. Once we have big enough closets we can stop worrying about tomorrow, and whether we have enough stuff laid in to be safe. Of course, we never seem to *get* to that place of rest, because it doesn't matter how much we have now, it doesn't matter how abundant our life is, we still live by that old adage that “you can never be too cautious about tomorrow.” Think of what could happen. So we continue to accumulate, “just in case.”

I can remember vestry meetings back in Indiana in the '90's where the treasurer would report dolefully that, while we seemed to be doing okay, who knew what the future might hold? In consecutive years of surplus, John used to say something like, “we're looking like we'll make it this budget year, but we have to be cautious.” The message was this - it might not be time to worry right at this moment, but perhaps we should be getting ready to be worried, just in case..... Build up a reserve, don't live for today, worry about tomorrow.

Bigger closets, a bigger budget, and what it'll take to get there: for John, and for us it's really

fear-based living – adopting anxiety as our standard face toward both the present and the future.

Today's gospel reading begins with a man doing exactly that - consumed by the fear that his brother is going to get more than he is - that what he will receive won't be enough. His response to his fears is typically human - we all know of families who have been bust open down the middle over the fear that one family member's going to get a better inheritance. Perhaps this is a universal fear, reflecting a universal hope: that *we'll* end up with dad's stock in our safety deposit box, mom's antique dresser in our bedroom, grandpa's new car in our garage. The need to have enough, to protect ourselves against all contingencies drives us - and holds us captive.

So the worried man comes to Jesus and asks for "justice." And waits for a response. As do we. And there must have been a sinking feeling in his stomach when he slowly realizes that Jesus isn't very interested in the source of his fears - sidesteps the request to be only a judge and not a prophet, and tells a story. For most of us, the story comes very close to home.

The rich farmer, Jesus says, goes about building bigger closets in which to store his abundance of wealth, hellbent on acquisition to make him feel safe, beyond fear. But then, in the morning, he drops dead! What he thought he needed to do with what he had acquired turns out to be wrong.

Is there a safety deposit box big enough for our souls? Can we build a closet big enough to hoard abundant life? No. Even the biggest closet can't store life, or postpone death. But our culture's pretty good and telling us that the way to an abundant life is through acquisition, hoarding, protecting what we have, storing them away in those great big closets, so that we can fill the hole inside ourselves. Remember the old adage: "The one who dies with the most toys wins"? (I always want to add - "Yeah, but they're still dead!")

The results of that way of living are all around us - we all know of people who work so hard at the acquiring that they lose contact with their families, experience personal tragedy even in the face of economic triumph. When such obsessions become too strong they can lead to very obvious and public disaster. Yet they - the financially successful, and those who devote great time and energy on looking good - they are our culture's modern day heroes.

There's an odd sense of denial in all of this. After all, it's a given that we can't take it with us. That denial is almost yelling out that we can cheat death, while on some level we know that the reaper will one day call for us, too.

Jesus' invitation to us is to ask: If death were coming tonight to each of you, how would you live today? I don't think you'd be thinking about yourself. I don't think you're asking: "what must I do to get into heaven?" You're thinking, I want to tell my family I love them, and not to grieve too much, but to get on with living a joyful, full life. I want to go knowing that - in my life - I did the best I could to be open, and generous, and compassionate. I want my friends to know that I cared.

The real truth is that we don't really belong to ourselves, we belong to those we love, and who love us, we belong to each other, and we belong to God. And that truth invites us to live a

different way, to let go of the fear and to live into the abundance that we all have, right now.

That's Jesus' message. The rich farmer is a fool not simply because he wants to hoard, to increase his wealth, but because in the hoarding he's stating his belief that his life and the things in it are his own, and are the only things that matter. He's lost sight of that powerful truth that we don't own anything, or anyone - they're gifts given to us by God.

But we know in our hearts that the rich farmer's response mirrors how most of the rest of us live. Instead of the joy of knowing that we can be a blessing to others in the sharing of our wealth, we end up living with the fear that others might just try and take from us what we think is rightfully ours, and our protectiveness replaces our faith.

The writer of today's epistle sees the Colossian Church living like the rich farmer. In urging them to live good and positive lives he's not simply issuing or reiterating a set of religious commands, he's encouraging them to let their better nature take the ascendancy, he's supporting the process of living out of love and not out of fear. This is a generous way of living, a way that shares out of a sense of thanksgiving for the gift received rather than the guilt of 'having', of compassion for those in need rather than an obligation to them, out of community rather than from self-preservation, out of abundance and not out of scarcity.

Both New Testament readings have the same message: no need for bigger closets. Out of the abundance that we have received, freely give. Trust in God and each, that, together we have enough and to spare. And out of the sense of thanksgiving that comes from that vision of abundance, give up the fear. Give up the hoarding. Embrace the moment with joy and thanksgiving. Give away love, and give away compassion and give out of your abundance you will be truly blessed. AMEN.