



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 8 Proper 13 (C)

Obituary for a Fool

[RCL] Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Obituaries are about the life, not the death. The death is the occasion, but it's usually reported in just one sentence, maybe with a detail—a disease, a condition, a struggle, an accident – and an age. We appraise: *so young; a long life; so sudden; a shock.*

Of course, when we know the person, there's more emotion as we read the details—the birthplace, activities, schools attended, occupations, associations, and the list of those closest who are bereaved. “She is survived by her loving...” - “*Survived.*” Obituary-speak that softens the phrase's meaning, “outlived by,” and hints at our hope that the life of the deceased will be *lived out by* the memories, commitments, or DNA of those left behind.

Naming survivors so soon after a loved one's death can sound aspirational, optimistic. *Will we survive* this loss? The hole in our hearts? The disruption of plans and destruction of hopes? When it's our loved one, the death is the headline, or at least the pivot point in the plot around which everything else will turn until we maybe someday come to the realization, *I actually have survived.*

But written about a stranger, a celebrity, or a public figure, an obituary is about the life lived, not the death. Obit writers collect facts, write drafts, and file them away, waiting for the when and the how. When the time comes, as it will, details are updated. Maybe an agent or spokesperson makes a statement. The death releases the facts of the life into view.

We read the obituary of someone we've admired, and we feel appreciation, maybe sorrow. For someone unknown to us, but impactful, we may feel like we're getting an answer to a question we didn't know we had—*oh, that's who . . .* In the case of the infamous, we may feel a rekindling of aversion or anger. The most engaging obituaries can entertain or instruct. Some function like a window; others like a mirror.

In today's Gospel, we read an obituary of sorts. It's a parable, and it too can function like a window or a mirror. Jesus puts it before us. Do we see through it to some truth? Do we see ourselves? Some of both?

“Mr. Rich Man died last night of unspecified causes. Known as very fortunate, some neighbors even called him blessed because his land produced abundantly. Man made plans to build bigger storage facilities for the wealth produced by his land, but he died before building could commence. He is survived by no one. Perhaps that is why he was sometimes observed talking to himself. No spokesperson could be reached for comment, but God, in a written statement called him a Fool.”

Okay, that’s not quite accurate. In the parable, God doesn’t pronounce about the man. God talks to the man. “You fool,” God says. “Your life isn’t your own, and neither is all that stuff. You poor fool.” The fact of the death releases the details, shows them for all to see. The rich man’s wealth wasn’t his, a fact his death makes clear. Just when he was trying to expand his tight grip on what he thought belonged to him, death loosened it. Permanently.

But the rich man isn’t the first person to have his plans interrupted by death. Why call him a fool?

Not because he’s wealthy. At least, that’s not stated in the parable, and in Jesus’ day, it was the same as in ours: money is a tool. Money funds, builds, clothes, feeds. Money builds hospitals, houses the homeless, teaches the illiterate, supports the arts, feeds the hungry. Jesus depended on the money of others to support him and his disciples. Jesus praised the woman who poured expensive perfume on him, preparing him, he said, for his death. Jesus was buried by a rich man who placed him in his own tomb. In the book of Acts, the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, a mark of Christian community is not communal poverty, but communal wealth, where through people’s sharing with one another, everyone has enough. The fool’s foolishness is not that he is rich.

But let’s be realistic: wealth can also divide, wall off, distract, lure, occupy, possess. And so, Jesus gives the rich fool’s obituary this introduction: “Beware. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” The word is literally “much-having,” the having of a lot and the wanting of more, the seeking to possess a whole lot of anything—money, Bible commentaries, Hummel figurines, power, influence, anything—because in seeking more and more, in the greedy quest for “much-having” there will never be enough, and we know the unjust lengths to which people will go. We can spend our lives building bigger and bigger metaphorical or literal barns and using others in their construction. When we die, our obituary can report we left behind a whole lot of earthly power and prestige and storage units chock full of stuff, but we can still be impoverished toward God.

Rich toward God or poor toward God. Before we think that’s just a quaint way to describe how we and God have a nice thing going, or how we’re missing out on something that would improve our lives, biblical literature seems to take the idea of a godly banking system very seriously.

If we think that treasures and saving them have only to do with accumulating things, money, whatever, for ourselves, we’re missing our most important savings option. If we think that treasure and how we accumulate it have only to do with our time on earth, we ignore a whole realm of possibilities for genuine wealth. There’s a whole other banking arrangement, a whole other treasury where riches can be stored and

accumulated. We all have access to it. It accepts deposits of all kinds. Forget the FDIC. This one is insured by God.

In the book of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), we hear

[B]e patient with someone in humble circumstances,
and do not keep him waiting for your alms.
Help the poor for the commandment's sake,
and in their need do not send them away empty-handed.
Lose your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend,
and do not let it rust under a stone and be lost.
Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High,
and it will profit you more than gold.
Store up almsgiving in your treasury,
and it will rescue you from every disaster;
better than a stout shield and a sturdy spear,
it will fight for you against the enemy. (Sirach 29:8-13 NRSV)

Jesus himself advocates this savings plan and tells us its benefits extend beyond this life: “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:20-21).

The fool looked rich, but he was putting all his investments in a plan that goes belly up every single time.

Fool. He missed what was going on right before his eyes. His *land* was producing abundantly. There he was, living on the agricultural equivalent of a gusher, and all he could think about was I, me, mine. Not, wow! Not, thanks! Not, what can I learn from this? Can this be replicated? And certainly not, how can I share?

Fool. Even in this life, his major goal was shallow: his own ease, enjoyment, the passing pleasures of food and drink. And he didn't even get that.

Fool. The man is the only person who inhabits his universe, or so he believes. The man can only talk about himself and to himself. In his obituary, no one else is mentioned. But of course, there were others in his life. Who planted, pruned, plucked? Who hauled, hoisted, harvested?

What is it like to be the child of this man? The spouse? “Yes, honey, Daddy is working late again today. Maybe you will see him on the weekend. Maybe he will put his smartphone away and play with you or come to your game. But, honey, you know he is so busy because he's working for the future...”

Fool. All those things—whose will they be? Has he left a will that just guarantees that a family that already has more than enough will continue to have more than enough? Rich Man, Jr. will continue to live an over-

stuffed, over-indulged life, with nothing saved in the bank account that actually matters? Couldn't this at least be a time when he thought beyond those with his own last name, those left to carry on some pathetic and passing legacy? Fool.

Window? Mirror? How we use things—giving thanks for everything entrusted into our care, sharing what we have, caring for others, not just by warm feelings, but, yes, by using our things and money gives us a wealth that uses no physical storage space, does not need to be worried about, managed, or guarded. Being rich toward God won't end when someone writes our obituary and people remember with fondness or contempt and turn the page.

Amen.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Dr. Amy Richter**, an Episcopal priest who, along with her husband, Joseph Pagano, serves in the Anglican Parish of Pasadena and Cormack in Newfoundland, Canada. Their most recent co-edited book is Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship by Episcopal writers, poets, theologians, and musicians. Amy's most recent book is a novel, Antimony, a thriller that combines mythology, biblical stories, and mystery.*