

Title: Rich Toward God
Date: 7/31/2022 (Proper 13, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Hosea 11:1-11](#); [Psalm 107:1-9, 43](#); [Colossians 3:1-11](#); [Luke 12:13-21](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/umwqGiefxi4?t=1282>

Give thanks to God, for God is good,
and the mercy of God endures for ever. (Ps 107:1)¹
Amen

This summer, time has flown by. It's hard to believe that tomorrow is August 1st.

This year, we're celebrating Rally Day on August 14th.
So, in two Sundays,
we will be blessing students and their backpacks
before the school year begins.

No matter **what** grade you're in,
if you plan on taking classes this fall,
please come and receive a blessing from the congregation.

Speaking of new beginnings,
I will be officially installed as your rector
on Saturday August 27 at 10:30am in the morning.
Bishop Ryan will read the letter of institution,
y'all will affirm that you will **continue** your ministry,
with me as your rector,
and then I will commit myself to this trust and responsibility.

We will sing, we will pray, we will listen to and for the word of God, and we will take
Communion.

It might seem odd to schedule this five months after my first day in the office, but that's
the way liturgy works. Well, in this case, that and the bishop's schedule.

Yet, this timing reflects the reality
that this celebration of new ministry
is not so much about me and my first day of work
as it is about the people of St. Alban's.

It's almost like a service of Confirmation for the congregation.

The people of St. Alban's are reaffirming, as a parish,
a commitment to being the body of Christ
here and out in the world,

with our Christian siblings, and **for** our non-Christian neighbors.

In a sense,
whether we are gathering for ordination or installation,
baptism or confirmation,
marriage or burial,
that particular service

isn't just about marking an ending or beginning;
it's about celebrating a continuation.

What we say and do in those services
point toward the presence of God that is **already**
in our life and our relationships,
even as we pray
that the example of our life and our relationships may
continue to reveal the grace and glory of God.²

In the book of the prophet Hosea, God said of the people of Israel,
“[I]t was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them” (Hos 3-4).

God loved them,
but the people of Israel were bent on turning away from God.
Perhaps they forgot
that God taught them to walk,
that God led them with kindness and love.
They thought everything happened by their own effort,
by their own merit.
They no longer recognized the grace and glory of God in their lives
and throughout their history.
So, in a time of crisis, they turned to Egypt for security,
they relied on political alliances of their own making.
They made sacrifices to other gods and offered incense to idols.
Eventually
the Assyrians defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel,
destroyed its capital city,
and exiled much of its population.

It's tempting to read this as a cautionary tale,
to believe that we haven't
and won't
turn away from God the way they did.
After all, we're in church, or watching it online, on a Sunday morning.
We know better, or at least more,
than those people who lived way back then. Maybe?
Last I checked,
none of us are offering incense to idols
(even though some have asked about having incense in this service),
and none of us

are making sacrifices to Baal the god of thunderstorms, though we
might be tempted to,
in exchange for some rain.

It's tempting
to try to figure out **who**
the modern-day equivalent
of the Egyptians and Assyrians would be,
and to think about those who have moved
because of fire or famine,
or restrictive policies on reproductive rights,
as those in exile.

But if we're not careful,
that line of thinking
can also take us far away from God.
Politics and policies are important
because they have a big impact
on the most intimate parts
of our bodies, our lives and our relationships.

At the same time,
politics and policies
must not become new idols, seen as our sole source of security.

Speaking of security,
in the gospel reading this week,
we hear Jesus being asked to weigh in on another sibling dispute.
Unlike Martha and Mary, the issue at hand isn't the difference between being focused on
one thing or on many things.
The issue at hand is being focused on the wrong thing.

A voice rings out in the crowd,
"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (Lk 12:13)
Not only does Jesus wisely
avoid becoming drawn into another family dispute,
he takes this opportunity to teach the crowd.

"Take care!" he said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;
for one's life
does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Lk 12:15)
Pretty straightforward, right?
Don't be greedy when it comes to having lots of things.
There is a similar teaching in the gospel according to Matthew
about storing up treasures not on earth but in heaven,
where there are no moths,
nor rust nor thieves (Mt 6:19-21).

But Jesus doesn't say anything about heaven.

Instead, he tells a parable
about a rich man whose land produced abundantly.

The rich man decides that his existing barns
aren't big enough to store this newfound abundance,
so he needs to tear them down and build larger ones.

Then

he can eat, drink, and be merry,
for he now has so many goods
that they will last him for many years.

Just as he's feeling very pleased with himself and his choices,
he hears the voice of God.

"You fool!

This very night your life is being demanded of you.
And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

So, maybe the lesson is:

Don't be greedy when it comes to having a lot of things,
because we can't take any of it with us when we die.

Right?

But then Jesus concludes the parable with,

"So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves
but are not rich toward God."

In Amy-Jill Levine's book,

Short Stories by Jesus:

The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi,

she explains, "Jesus told parables because they serve...as keys that can unlock the
mysteries we face by helping us ask the right questions."³

The question here isn't so much

"How should we spend our money?"

or "What should we spend our money on?"

The question is: What does it mean to be rich **toward** God?

Looking at today's readings from Scripture,

here are a couple of starting points.

Being rich toward God

is acknowledging the grace and glory of God.

When the land produces abundantly,

or

when we receive more than we could have asked for or imagined,

we give thanks to God when we recognize it as a gift of God.
Knowing that it came from God,
we are aware it is not ours to keep.
We don't build bigger barns,
we don't keep what we have gained all to ourselves.

This applies to possessions, yes.
As the psalmist reminded us,
ours is a God who satisfies the thirsty
and fills the hungry with good things (Ps 107:9).
This can **also** apply to loving others as God loves us.
There is a kind of passion and desire
that is **not** modeled on the love of God.
It cuts us off from other people
and leads us to draw a smaller and smaller circle
around me and mine.

On the other hand,
when we recognize that we are
overflowing with the love of God,
we turn toward God to do as God did,
as God continues to do.
We open wide our arms;
we approach and embrace and nourish
more and more people around us.

Being rich toward God
is looking toward God for security,
instead of earthly alliances or earthly treasures.

That person in the crowd
asks Jesus to settle a family dispute over an inheritance.
They aren't there to learn from Jesus,
or to ask for help to repair the relationship
between them and their brother,
but to ask Jesus to impose his will on their behalf.

In the verses following
the excerpt of Paul's letter to the Colossians we read for today,
Paul tells us that just as the Lord has forgiven us,
we are called to "bear with one another and,
if anyone has a complaint against one another,
forgive each other."

The person in the crowd might have heard Jesus say something like this,
but it wasn't what they were looking for, so it went in one ear and out the other.
So, perhaps being rich toward God is to be rich WITH God.

I'm not talking about the prosperity gospel, the promise that faith will be material, financial success, the promise that if you give money to God, to the church, to that preacher you will receive tenfold, hundredfold in return.⁴

Just as God bent down to feed us,
just Christ emptied himself to take on human likeness,
being rich with God is to cast off old clothes and practices,
including those listed in Paul's letter to the Colossians,
greed (which is idolatry), evil desire, wrath, malice, slander,
and so on.

Being rich with God is to, as Paul describes,
"clothe ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in
knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Col 3:10)

And when we renew ourselves,
pattern ourselves, in the image of our creator,
the image of love,
he tells us,
everything will be in perfect harmony,
and the peace of Christ will rule in our hearts.
(Col 3:13-15)

I suspect that **this** will provide a more lasting peace,
not to mention a more lasting life, in Christ,
than the grains and goods
the rich man stored up so that he could
"relax, eat, drink and be merry."

Maybe being rich toward God is always remembering to turn toward God,
so that God is at the center of our lives,
so that we are so filled with the Holy Spirit
that we will follow the Holy Spirit
to be the body of Christ present and active in the world.

Maybe being rich toward God
is always offering up our gratitude and our praise
for the continuing presence of God in our lives,
at beginnings and at endings,
in times of abundance, and in times of scarcity.

What will it mean for **you** to be rich toward God?

¹ <https://yptheology.org/inclusive-psalter/>

² <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/liturgy/>

³ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, p 297

⁴ <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/9/1/15951874/prosperity-gospel-explained-why-joel-osteen-believes-prayer-can-make-you-rich-trump>