

Let's begin today with the question, "In what do we place our trust?" And the next question, which we usually stop short of asking: "What are we trusting for?" Or, in other words, what exactly is human fulfillment and flourishing? What does it mean to be happy, content, and fulfilled as a human being?

As with so many of these questions, it's wise to go back to the Garden of Eden and think about what life was like before the fall of humanity through Adam's sin. How did Adam and Eve live in the Garden? Well first, there was sufficient comfort and food; their physical being was secure. They needed no clothing so the temperatures must have been comfortable, and while they perhaps built themselves a lodging of some kind, they probably didn't need to do so. There was plenty of food. All of the trees and plants there—except one—were given to them for food. They were not afraid that they wouldn't have enough to feed themselves or a place to live.

But this wasn't the end of it. Adam and Eve did not just lounge around all day feeding each other grapes. As you recall, they also were given duties by God to perform. Adam was to name the animals, and this required the study of the Creation in which he was placed. Both man and wife together tended the garden. They were given the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, so they were engaged in productive activity and in ordering the chaos of the world. They received the gifts of God, and to these they added their effort and imagination. Thus they brought forth life, grew in their knowledge of the Creator, and themselves became creators of beauty and pro-creators of humanity.

And this is the biblical image of of human flourishing that we are given.

Of course in our Fall into sin, the security of being that we once enjoyed was removed. Now we pull weeds and fight pests to coax produce from the earth by the sweat of our brow. The toil required to sustain our beings has increased, and the fruitfulness of our efforts is no longer guaranteed. We are now ruled by death and the fear that we may not survive. We compete with each other to lay hold of scarce resources for sustenance. Where we once enjoyed abundance and security, now we have dearth and insecurity. It is hard to make it in this fallen world—very hard.

So with this context, let us revisit our first question. In what do we place our trust? As we have just described, since the Fall of Man, we know longer have the intimacy with God that we once did. He seems distant. Therefore, we have turned from His provision to make our own ways in the world. We no longer trust in the good gift of God, but we join the hustle and bustle, the throng of careers and investments and of getting ahead of the other guy. Though we may not admit it, we believe that money will save us. “If I just have such-and-such an amount in my bank account... if I just am able to buy a house... if this... if that... then I will have it made. I won’t have to battle it out any longer.”

This may be the temptation for most of us. But some (more and more, it seems) have become discouraged, disillusioned, and perhaps don’t have the stomach or the vision to climb the ladder – economic or social or whatever it may be. The struggle is too hard. We don’t know where to begin. So, we check out of the game, and turn to sex, drugs, and rock and roll, or to the internet with its endless distractions, or to whatever vice is soothing and at hand, in order to self-medicate. These are our sinful tendencies toward *accidie*, which we’ve mentioned in other sermons – dejection and hopelessness, sloth, laziness.

This morning, though, we are focusing upon another tendency, that of the sin of covetousness. Covetousness is the desire to have things, particularly those things that others have. We also know it as greed. And what we see in our lessons this morning is that greed is really a lack of faith. It is a desire to look to ourselves as the source of our being and security instead of looking to God. Thus there is also a smattering of pride, and discontent with the provision that God has given to us in the present thrown in to boot. Consider the following taken from our gospel lesson, St. Matthew 6 beginning at verse 30 (emphasis added).

But if God doth so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek; for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

Of course the lesson also began with this confrontational admonition, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” There it is stated quite bluntly. What is your God? The money you save up in your bank account? The wealth you have squirreled away in a hidden safe? The rentals you own? The size of your portfolio? The business you are building? Are these the things in which you place your trust? Will they save you in the time of trial?

Or consider this morning’s psalm:

Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil, * when wickedness at my heels compasseth me round about?

There be some that put their trust in their goods, * and boast themselves in the

multitude of their riches.

But no man may deliver his brother, * nor give a ransom unto God for him,

(For it cost more to redeem their souls, * so that he must let that alone for ever;)

That he shall live always, * and not see the grave.

For he seeth that wise men also die and perish together, * as well as the ignorant and foolish, and leave their riches for other.

Do we put our trust in goods and riches? They cannot save either in this world or in the next; they can be stolen or removed beyond our reach. They may become worthless. Can you give money to God in order to buy your salvation? No, God has no need of your dollar. It all originates from Him anyway. We give back to Him what He has given us as an acknowledgment that He is Lord over all things and in thanksgiving for His provision. He doesn't need your dollar. The stark reality that strips all of the pretense away is that of death. If the Lord tarries, we will all of us face our mortality some day – and that day is getting closer and closer as our time here passes.

Given this, we ought to be most concerned with our standing with God. Unfortunately in this area too, we are tempted to want to control our salvation. We would like a check list that says “do this and this and this, and then you are good.” This is what the epistle lesson is about, too. There were Christians in the region of Galatia, what is now Central Turkey, who had among them people who were known as Judaizers. They asserted that Christians had to first become Jews, meaning that men would have to submit to the Jewish covenantal rite of circumcision. St. Paul states in the lesson that this was antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the covenantal entrance into the Church, not circumcision. Having been baptized, one no longer needs to be circumcised.

So we are asked the questions once again, “In what do we place our trust?” The Judaizers placed their trust in the Old Testament sign of the covenant. It was a physical sign that could not be doubted. They were saying, *I’ve done this thing, I’ve been circumcised; or, I have paid my indulgence, I have done my penance, I have done this good work, therefore I am in good standing with God. Look at this external evidence, this is my security, my confidence. But no man can give a ransom for his soul. Salvation certainly has an objective beginning in the cleansing waters of baptism, but then we must work out our faith in fear and trembling for the remainder of our days in this world.*

There are two responses we can give when faced with these realities. First, we may throw up our hands. We may fall into the sin of accidie. *Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, and therefore I give up. Because I have no ultimate control, either through wealth or through legalism, I will be ruled by death and pursue escapism; I will avoid dealing with the existential crisis of life.*

But there’s no confidence here. There is no hope here. This is no way to live, and no way to have the abundant life we were intended to have, and which has been won for us in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

What is the other response? How should we actually do life? Certainly we don’t expect not to have to work. In history, many have taken such admonitions as we find in the gospel lesson today very literally and given away their wealth and become itinerant monastics, relying upon the generosity of others for his food and sustenance. St. Francis is one example of a person who did so. But if we all lived this way, we would have neither food, nor clothing, nor shelter. Some provide so that others can more fully serve God in Christ’s Body,

the Church. But St. Paul does not tolerate those who take advantage of the hospitality of the brethren without contributing through their own efforts. We think particularly of 1 Thessalonians 3:10-12, the heart of which says, "... that if any would not work, neither should he eat." All should work for the benefit of all. The Church should not tolerate freeloaders, although in practicality, it is usually quite difficult to distinguish true need from graft.

The virtue needed, to untangle this mess here, to oppose the sin of coveteousness, of placing our trust in that which does not merit it, is the virtue of Justice. At the heart of this virtue is giving to each his rightful due. Money is a useful tool, but it will not save you. Diligent work should be fairly compensated. But excessive wages are likewise unjust. Good behavior should be encouraged. Criminal behavior must be punished in a manner that fits the crime. This all speaks to working toward well-ordered societies and to well-ordered individuals within society.

St. Augustine considers the Fall of Humanity as a disordering of our affections. In Christ, we therefore sort out these disordered affections. We re-order them in a just manner, a manner that is appropriate for the children of God. This amounts to a re-prioritization of our values – putting those things first that should be first and de-prioritizing those things which do not deserve our primary attention.

Key to accomplishing the reordering of our souls, the reordering of our loves, is the 33rd and 34th verses of the gospel lesson. "But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Be not therefore anxious for the morrow: for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Of first priority,

therefore, is God. This is the foundation of our re-ordered souls, of our redeemed souls, of our souls that have been restored to fellowship with God. Seeking first the Kingdom of God means prioritizing the Church in our lives. Seeking His righteousness means pursuing godliness so that we cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives instead of the sins of the flesh that we discussed last week. We are to put *these* things – our corporate life in Christ and our individual lives in Christ – first.

Needless to say, these issues are still not easy to untangle. But God promises to provide for all of our other needs if we trust Him by seeking first His Kingdom. All of these other things will be added unto you. In time, God will reorder our lives, but our ultimate security is only upon His providential love and care for us. Put His Kingdom and His righteousness first.

But also how are we to not be anxious for tomorrow? It is important that we should not read this as, “do not concern yourself at all about the future.” Prudent planning for the future and wise stewardship of resources – time, talent, and treasure – are not prohibited here. However at the end of the day, it is God who makes the sun rise and set at its appointed times. It is God who provides for all the creatures that He has made. And it is God who gives us what we need even when the bottom falls out of the stock market, even when the government is oppressive and intrusive and works to our detriment, even when illness, death, or loss comes upon us suddenly. We live in a fallen world. We cannot avoid such tragedies. Let us be prudent in planning, but always acknowledge that it is God is our hope and strength. He will sustain us in the day of trouble.

In what do we place our trust? We place our trust unfailingly in God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and enabled by the life giving presence of the Holy Spirit in us. Put

2024-09-08

15th Sunday after Trinity

K. Bartel, 8

away all of those things that distract us from God and seek His Kingdom and His righteousness first. Give Him, the One who made the heavens and the earth, the One who made each and every one of us, who knows the very numbers of the hairs of our heads, His due worship and our due confidence. And then give to others, and to all of the other cares and concerns of the world, their just due as well. All these things will be added unto us as we have need. Have confidence in Him and to Him be all glory and praise.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.