

Homily St Pius & St Anthony 18th Sunday Ordinary Year C1

From Sunday to Sunday, gospel to gospel, sometimes there are ripples that carry through succeeding masses, and we have such an echo today of Martha's bold demand of a couple weeks ago. We remember Martha presumptively trying to tell Jesus how to be God! She told him basically, "Jesus, make Mary get in the kitchen and sweat with me". Well, today we hear a similar bold demand of a brother telling Jesus that He should 'judge in his favor' ruling that his brother share more inheritance with him. Of course, Jesus slows down the man's pushy urgency by inviting him to consider, "Just say, someone does force your brother to do something for you, is that going to increase the love between you?" Jesus is more concerned about the relationship between the brothers than any real estate between them. Then Jesus offers a wonderful parable, leading all of us to reflect on how we manage stuff in our lives, the material possessions here on earth. What is truly lasting? What is worth investing in more: Material stuff here, or those more eternal treasures ahead such as eternity with God itself (faith) and strong relationships among us human beings? So, Jesus' parable causes us to reflect upon that great leveler of us all—death. In the parable, a farmer has a great crop year and harvests more than he ever has before. In fact his barns can't hold it all. So with such a windfall and security now for years, he decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, yet the surprise on him is that he isn't going to live through the night. Then what comes of his grand plans! We've all heard the saying, 'You never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul' or the African proverb, "Death shrouds have no pockets". We don't take anything with us. Jesus' parable is meant to make the man think about what he is really working for in this life. Does he just want more stuff, or does he want a brother? What is going to matter for eternity? In his demand for an inheritance ruling, he may get the settlement, but also lose his brother. Again, death levels all of our presumed advantages in life, it sets back all of our supposed 'getting ahead' of others. We can't insure against death's eventual claim. The farmer's surprise in Jesus' parable reminds me of the middle eastern story (W. Somerset Maugham's version) titled an 'Appointment in Samarra', which tells about a man who went to the market one day to buy vegetables, and he bumped into a hooded figure, and it was death! He thought death made a threatening gesture toward him, so in great fear he dropped all of his vegetables, turned and ran back home. He told his wife he had a threatening brush with death, and needed to flee to another town-Samarra quickly to escape death's call on him. So he took their horse, and off he went to escape death. His wife wanted to explore this herself, so she also went to market and bumped into the hooded figure of Death. She asked, him "What threatening action did you make toward my husband this morning, because he came home so scared and white-faced?" And Death responded,

“He said I threatened him? No, he startled me, I was so surprised to run into him here, because I didn’t have an appointment with him until tomorrow morning in Samarra.” We can’t outrun/outplan death.

Jesus’ parable says as much. We may think we can hedge & insure ourselves against death, but such policies never pay us. The farmer in the gospel thought his abundant crop harvest guaranteed him years of secure comfort, so he pulled down his barn to build even bigger ones. But that’s no benefit to him – he lost everything! But this parable doesn’t only invite us to keep death in mind, but also to evaluate how we interact with material things and possessions here on earth? Does our stuff own us or we own it, does it use me or I properly use it? What do I spend my life on? Yet, Jesus goes further to suggest that there is an eternal investment that does return to us. It is called faith and life in God, valuing what God values, loving, serving (saving?) life created in His image—that would be the care of other human beings- That brother of mine has an eternal soul. Like my own, that is lasting, that is what I need to be working on. So, back to the parable, Jesus emphasizes keeping relationship to the brother over any relationship to material stuff. The stuff comes and goes, but the brother has an eternal soul that I need to care for more for that than any earthly possession. So Jesus invites us to invest in what lasts - the eternal goods of God Himself, other people & our faith. Because imagine how this parable could have worked out for good: the farmer could say, “My barn is already full, much left over from last year even, so I will give my harvest to my neighbors who lost their crops to blight or flood, and I will invest in their good will—next year, I may be in their condition.” That would be like the Amish social insurance program of expressed commitment to one another: If your crops fail, you get mine, & if mine fail, you share with me. Or if my barn burns, you will come build me one, and if yours blows down, I will come and build you one. That is a lasting investment, by investing in other people (our relationship to them) and investing in what matters to God (as Jesus says it). This all brings up the good connections built from the old barter system of mutual exchange: I have an abundance of corn crop so I give you some, and you pass along to me some of your sugar cane. This mutual concern didn’t just make a strong economy but it forged strong relationships of trust among people. I trust your food because you trust my food.

Or such good investment in other people through relationship to them and their eternal souls (not material stuff) is a type of heavenly market of exchange, eternal investment in each other. I remember from an old TV Series of the 1980’s called ‘The Equalizer’ which featured the British actor Edward Woodward as Robert McCall (nothing against the modern versions, with Denzel Washington or Queen Latifah but the original is always the classic!). in the series, Robert McCall was retired company spy, become a

do-gooder who assisted people with his skills to get them out of deep problems. And every episode ended with the people he helped saying, "How can I pay you back-what do I owe you?" And he would always say, "***You owe me nothing now. But one day I may call you and ask a favor, then you can pay me.***" He was investing in them as a good person he helped, that maybe one day in the future he could receive good back from them, or in the meantime he'd say, "Pay it forward, pass it along to someone else." Such care and help to another person, that is eternal, that is lasting and, that, you can count on. It is what Jesus referred to as 'treasure in heaven'. Our loving service and care given to others, that is banked in heaven on account; and it returns to us, it pays in eternit