

The 8th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 18 (C)
August 4, 2019
Text: Luke 12:13-21

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

Each summer, we travel back to Arkansas, spending some time with my mom and taking care of things around the house. One of the things about Arkansas is that there are all sorts of bugs and animals crawling around and flying around that we don't have out here—and you never know what might turn out to be dangerous. I remember a few years ago, my sister was rummaging around in the shed, and I heard a shriek. She had turned over a rolled-up piece of carpet, and out slithered a big blacksnake. They're really great to have around because they eat mice and rats. My sister just hadn't expected it to land right at her feet.

There was another time when I was working in the front yard and noticed a big black snake slithering across the grass. I figured it was that same old blacksnake from the shed, so I stepped closer to take a look. Its scaly skin was beautiful, shiny black, and it was a big snake. But then, after admiring it for a little while, I noticed that it didn't have the typical blunt snout that a blacksnake has. Instead, it had a big, triangular-shaped head, and its belly was white, like a water moccasin. And it turned out to be a water moccasin—one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. So, since I didn't want that thing slithering around through the yard and having one of the kids run into it, I got an ax and chopped its head off. But it gave me the creeps just thinking about how close I had been standing to that thing. (Uggh!)

And in our gospel story for today, Jesus alerts us to some other dangerous things that we might come in contact with from time to time. Things like money (show a dollar bill). Eww! Doesn't it just give you the creeps! Except that it doesn't. We handle it every day and it don't bother us at all. We give it to our children to handle! Maybe we even wish we had more of it to handle! And that's why what Jesus has to say to us in our gospel story is so challenging and difficult for us to hear—and so important for us to hear.

It all began with someone in the crowd asking Jesus to settle a family dispute over the inheritance—which sounds like stepping into the middle of a snake pit, if you ask me. So Jesus declined the request, and then went on to speak about what he saw as the real, underlying danger—greed, desire, wanting more. These are things that are truly dangerous. It's not really the dollars themselves, but what they tap into in us. It's our anxiety about the future, or our desire to be immune to the uncertainties of life; it's how we imagine having money gives life value—that's the danger. It's what's in us that requires us to be on our guard.

So how does Jesus illumine our need to be on guard? He tells a story. The land of a rich man produced an abundant harvest, more than he could store in his barns. It was a crisis! What would he do? He decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so he could enjoy his ample goods for many years. That evidently was the wrong decision, because God enters the story to tell the man he is a fool. This very night his life is demanded of him. There will be no more eating, drinking and being merry.

It's a harsh little story with a sharp edge to it. But it isn't condemnation of saving or trying to live responsibly or planning for the future. If you put a little bit of money away this month into savings or your 401k, this story isn't about that. Notice how Jesus sets the story up. "The land of a rich man produced abundantly." Do we hear a hint of gratitude or thanks to God as the One from whom the blessings of life come? No! The only person who appears in the man's calculations is himself. He has no thought for how he might give God thanks or use his good fortune to help anyone else. It's all me-me-me.

And the rich man in the story is just the most extreme example of what can happen to any of us. He shows us how not to deal with the uncertainties and challenges of life. We all know that life comes with no guarantees. We're healthy today. Tomorrow? No telling. We have a job now, and the economy seems to be chugging along pretty well. But next week? Who knows! There is an unavoidable vulnerability that goes hand-in-hand with being alive. And being vulnerable means that feeling some anxiety or worry about the future is just part of being human. The question is how we'll deal with that uncertainty, what we'll do about the anxiety or worry.

There are, of course, some genuinely self-destructive ways of dealing with the uncertainties of life. We can try to make anxiety or worry go away with alcohol or drugs. We can try to make them go away with eating or shopping or working too hard. But all of those ways of dealing with anxiety just create other problems—and they don't really fix the underlying fact that life is uncertain. They are just numb us to feeling vulnerable or anxious. And unfortunately, they also numb us to feeling gratitude or joy.

Perhaps we might imagine that money can solve our problems with anxiety or worry about the future. It seems like money can serve as a hedge against all of the unknowns that can pop up. Money can buy food and shelter and clothes. Money can pay for health care and entertainment. With money, we can be prepared for a rainy day. With money, we can enjoy some of the beautiful and good things in life. And all of that is good!

However, there are two problems with using money as a hedge against the uncertainties of life. The first is: how much is enough? Well, given how unpredictable the world is, it doesn't seem to matter how much you have. You'd probably better have a little more, just in case. You see, money doesn't really fix the problem that life is not entirely under our control, and it opens the door in us to wanting more—always more. And feeling the need for more begins to control us. Money begins to write the rules for our lives, whether we think of ourselves as wealthy or not.

And the second problem with using money as a hedge—besides the fact that it doesn't work—is that it has the potential to isolate us from others. If we see money as the way to be entirely self-sufficient, then we don't really need anyone else. We don't need community. And at the end of that road is the rich landowner in Jesus' parable. With his bigger barns, he thought he could enjoy his life without having to give a thought to anyone else. I read an article recently that described the United States as the wealthiest, saddest, loneliest country in the world. And those things are connected—wealthiest, saddest, loneliest. When our wealth means we don't need each other—well, that's just no way to live.

So what are we to do? We start by embracing the fact that life is uncertain. But God gives us this unpredictable gift to share together. And together is not just how we find happiness. Together we find strength. Together we are better able to juggle the “who knows what’s coming next” about this life. In fact, to be human, we need each other. And Jesus is all about community, all about bringing people together. It turns out that belonging to each other, caring for our neighbors, loving each other, being generous in whatever ways were able—that’s what makes us rich in the only way that matters, that is rich toward God.

It turns out that this story, which at first glance seemed to be about money, turns out really to be a story about a different kind of wealth—the riches God fills our lives with when love is at the center of who we are, when compassion and care and community are at the top of our priority list. A person’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions—even though this whole crazy world seems to act that way. Life is a gift God gives us to share. Life is about belonging to each other. That doesn’t take away the uncertainty of life. Community doesn’t eliminate the things that cause us to feel vulnerable. Instead, in community, we are vulnerable together, which not only gives us strength, but brings joy and belonging and friendship and a sense of meaning.

The only wealth that finally matters is experienced as we live with love and care and generosity. The warning Jesus wants to give us is that, if the uncertainty of life taps into our anxiety so that we latch onto money to solve our anxiety problem, it actually becomes an obstacle to that wealth that really matters, life that is shared. The danger to really watch for is anything that creates distance and places obstacles between us and other people—because God gives us this beautiful, temporary gift to share together. Thanks be to God. Amen.