

18th Sunday Ordinary Time
August 1, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

Rich in What Matters to God

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23
Psalm 90
Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11
Luke 12:13-21

The Dead Sea is a popular place to visit in the Holy Land because of the buoyancy of the water—anyone can float in it. The Dead Sea is fed by the Jordan River, but has no outlets; therefore, salt and minerals have accumulated, causing the Dead Sea to be more than 8 times saltier than the ocean. With no outlets, the Dead Sea is putrid, smelly, and lifeless, which makes it a wonderful image of what happens to us when our *generosity* quits flowing out!

To be generous means to be liberal in our giving to others what we ourselves have received. Like a healthy lake, we must both receive as well as give. This requires an attitude of gratitude for what we have received and a willingness to not hold on to it, but rather, to pass it on to others. In order to be spiritually healthy, we must give our generosity an outlet. The man in today's Gospel reading did not do this; he was more like the Dead Sea.

We don't know anything about the man in today's Gospel reading, except that he sounds a lot like Martha from our reading two weeks ago. Like Martha, he complained to Jesus expecting Him to take up his cause, but instead, Jesus taught him an important lesson. Regardless of whether the man was looking for justice or just being greedy, Jesus obviously saw the encounter as a good time to teach about the importance of being generous.

Throughout the Gospels, we see that Jesus never shied away from preaching about wealth, possessions, and the importance of generosity despite the fact that such sermons are rarely appreciated. The main message of all of His sermons on wealth is that the meaning of life does not consist in getting rich and having possessions. His message can be summed up in the last sentence of our Gospel reading today when Jesus told His listeners that they were to be "rich in what matters to God" (Luke 12:21).

This is the same message that we heard in today's first reading from the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, explained in a very logical way how wealth and possessions can ultimately become vanity. He reminds us that we must never treat wealth as an end in and of itself, but as a *means to a much higher end and purpose*—ultimately, knowing and loving God. This is how Saint John Vianney understood wealth.

Saint John had a slush fund. As this 19th century priest from France grew in popularity, his tiny parish was flooded with pilgrims. Many of those pilgrims made donations to his parish in gratitude for St. John's ministry. At first, St. John used these donations to make necessary repairs to his church. After he finished those repairs however, the money was still coming in and in large amounts! Therefore, St. John created a "slush" fund to be used for missionary work.

As soon as the fund earned a certain amount of money, St. John would use it to sponsor an annual parish mission in another parish. Instead of hoarding the money that people donated, he used it to spiritually benefit the lives of people in other parishes. He never saved the money longer than was necessary to sponsor the next parish mission. He would even get excited when a particular pilgrim's donation put his fund over its goal and he realized he could sponsor another mission! Saint John Vianney knew the *real* value of money—it can help to build the Kingdom of God in people's hearts. He understood that money was a gift to be received and a gift to be given.

Our readings today challenge us to live like St. John—understanding the real, authentic value of money. When we understand wealth to be a means to an end, to be a means to blessing others, then we grow in gratitude for what we receive and we grow in generosity in what we give. In doing so, we will be “rich in what matters to God.” Saint Basil the Great, a bishop from the fourth century, described such richness, writing—

Your reward for the right use of the things in this world will be everlasting glory, a crown of righteousness, and the kingdom of heaven; God will welcome you, the angels will praise you, all men who have existed since the world began will call you blessed.... Come, distribute your wealth freely, give generously to those who are in need.

-From a sermon on charity by Saint Basil the Great

I want to make some suggestions for us as a parish and for us as individuals that can help us to be “rich in what matters to God.” First, though, let me say that I think it’s awesome that our parish tithes back into the community each year. This coming fiscal year’s budget includes 11.1% of our parish income being used to help other people! We should all be very proud of that fact!

As a parish, there are many ways that we can be “rich in what matters to God.” For example, we could adopt a mission church overseas. We could participate in providing a micro-loan to a worthy person or community. We could occasionally host the sale of “fair-trade” goods after Mass. We could get involved in Catholic Charities. We could become more involved in the awesome work that our Social Concerns Committee is already doing. The possibilities are endless!

As individuals and/or families, we could be “rich in what matters to God” by doing any of the things I just mentioned, or we might consider some other possibilities like sponsoring a missionary priest, a child in an orphanage, or a seminarian. We could sponsor one of our teenagers or a chaperone on the youth group’s annual mission trip. We could help build a house for Habitat for Humanity. We could have Masses offered for those who have died or work at an agency for the poor. We could participate in Operation Rice Bowl during Lent. Once again, the possibilities are endless!

A healthy lake not only receives water, but it gives water. A healthy Christian not only receives gifts from God, but gives them, as well. This week, I encourage us to be mindful of what we have received and to meditate on the outlets of generosity that God has offered to us.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read Ezekiel 47:1-12. This chapter provides a beautiful image of a stream flowing from God’s Temple, giving life to everything it waters. We are God’s temple. Take some time to share with God what it is like to have His Living Water flow out of you in order to bring new life to those around you.

- ✚ Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-11. This is a powerful Scripture passage about the blessings of generosity and God’s providential care. Spend some time reflecting on it. What word or sentence stands out to you the most? Talk to God about it.