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Here today, gone tomorrow

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Aug. 3, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

?Brothers and sisters, if you were raised with Christ, seek what is above.? With these words, the author of the Letter to the Colossians sets the tone for our prayer together this Sunday. We are invited to focus on and find our fulfillment in God, rather than be bound by things of earth or so focused on ourselves that our perspective and our vision become myopic.

Having entered fully and freely into the sacred mystery of Jesus? passion, death and resurrection, believers are graced so we may put on a new self, a self that images God. This new self is called out of immorality to integrity, out of idolatry and dishonesty to truthfulness. We are called to have a single-hearted love of God and all others, without distinction as to their race or social status.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23
Psalm 90
Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11
Luke 12:13-21

In today?s first reading, the ancient philosopher Qoheleth shares a somber view of the human experience. Perhaps there are times in our lives when we, too, ascribe to his view-point. Worries, disappointments, experiences of loss, frustration and hopelessness weigh us down. We sense a certain futility; we work and work, and have little to show for it. Then we die, and like a puff of wind (vanity), we are gone -- and who remembers us? Says Scripture scholar Fr. Addison Wright, ?Qoheleth?s negative assessment of the workaholic should be constructively provocative for those who believe that posture to have value or to be synonymous with religious dedication? (?Ecclesiastes,? *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 1990).

From Qoheleth?s sobering assessment, we turn to the Lucan Jesus, who, in today?s Gospel, asks each of us to consider our investments. As the protagonist in Jesus? parable, the rich man appears to be deeply invested in his farm and its crops. Therein lay the source of his security and his well-being. When he had a surplus harvest, it didn?t occur to him to share with the needy. Rather, he figured he?d build bigger barns. He had yet to learn that his life did not consist of his possessions. In the parable, God tells the man that he will die that night and any treasure he may have amassed will be left behind. He is rich, but not rich in what matters to God. We can well imagine the rich man chanting Qoheleth?s mantra: ?Vanity of vanities and all is vanity.?

Surely the urgency of Jesus? teaching invites us to pay careful attention. Since no one can know the future or the length of one?s days, our response to God requires a timely decision. What can I share? What can I give to ease

the need of another? There are no pockets in a shroud, and hearses do not pull U-Hauls. It is expedient that we take Jesus? words to heart, that we make his attitude our own and that we see and love and tend to the needy as he would.

Augustine, bishop of Hippo, knew what it was to be wealthy and carefree, but after his conversion, he had this to say: ?Poverty is the load of some and wealth is the load of others, perhaps the greater one of the two. It may weigh them to perdition. Bear the load of your neighbor?s poverty, and let him bear with you the load of your wealth. You lighten your load by lightening his? (quoted in *A Treasure of Quips, Quotes and Anecdotes*, Anthony Castle, ed., Twenty-Third Pub., 1998).

Who knows how many loads could have been lightened by the rich man?s wealth? In telling this parable to his disciples, Jesus challenged them to consider their attitudes toward their own possessions. However, as Charles Cousar has pointed out, this Lucan Gospel does not give specific answers to our questions about possessions (*Texts for Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). Nor does it offer rules that define how much is enough or what people should do with their wealth. Readers will hunt in vain for a guideline, a principle or a quantifiable definition of greed that reveals with certainty whether they have crossed the line.

Jesus? parable does not offer a new law, but it does confront believers with a powerful message that continues to prod the imagination and conscience. To be ever alert to the promptings of greed, to be ever aware that all we are and all we have is God?s gift and not a hard-earned acquisition, to be warned most soberly that wealth does not secure our future -- these are more than rules. These are the daily challenges of the believer in Jesus.

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