

Live Simply. Share with Others. Be Free.

A Homily for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN

Sunday, August 4, 2019 – Proper 13

In the name of God: who calls us to live simply, to share our abundance with others, and to be free. Amen.

Today's Old Testament Lesson, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel remind me of an article that went viral a few years ago, in which a palliative nurse recorded the top five regrets of those who were dying.¹ Here are the top five regrets that nurse Bronnie

Ware witnessed in those she cared for during the end of their lives:

- 1. I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.**
- 2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.**
- 3. I wish I had the courage to express my feelings.**
- 4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.**
- 5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.**

I think, deep down, we all fear dying with these regrets. Thankfully, the Book of Ecclesiastes, the teachings of Jesus in today's Gospel, and my favorite fourth century Cappadocian Father of the Early Christian Church, Saint Basil the Great's homilies on today's Gospel, all help us to face our fear of these five regrets.

The Lesson from the Book of Ecclesiastes today states, **“What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do**

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying>

not rest. This also is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23). One of the deepest regrets of the dying is that they worked too much. Our work can become an idol. When our entire identity is defined by the work we idolize, we cease to be creatures made in the image of the God of Sabbath Rest, the God of Relationship; and we become slaves branded with the iron rod of toil, despair, strain, vexation, loneliness, and vanity. When work ceases to be joyfully grounded in our God-given purpose to love and share and serve Christ in all people, we become estranged from our family, friends, and neighbors, and become defined by the vexing toil and strain required for the worship of the Idol of Greed.

Greed is what today’s Gospel denounces. Jesus says, **“Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions...those who store up treasures for themselves are not rich toward God” (Luke 12:13-21).** Many of us, particularly those who have had to move from one home to another, know what it feels like to be possessed by our possessions. All the possessions we toil to own, begin to own us. In the Gospel, instead of being grateful for his barns filled with grain, and instead of sharing his surplus of grain with the needy, the Rich Fool in Jesus’ parable selfishly and greedily pulls down his barns and builds larger ones to hoard his abundance for

himself. An abundance that goes to waste. In his homily *To the Rich* Saint Basil the Great relates this parable with Jesus' commandment to love. Saint Basil writes,

Care for the needy requires the expenditure of wealth: when all share alike, disbursing their possessions among themselves, they each receive a small portion for their individual needs. Thus, those who love their neighbor as themselves possess nothing more than their neighbor; yet surely, you seem to have great possessions! How else can this be, but that you have preferred your own enjoyment to the consolation of the many? For the more you abound in wealth, the more you lack in love.²

I love Saint Basil the Great because he makes us uncomfortable and challenges us to consider whether our love of wealth trumps our love of neighbors in need. In his homilies on Social Justice, Saint Basil the Great is just as courageous as he is in his homily *To the Rich*, in which he reminds us that,

The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy. You are thus guilty of injustice toward as many as you might have aided, and did not.

And he counsels,

Let us zealously imitate the early Christian community, where everything was held in common – life, soul, concord, a common table, indivisible kinship – while unfeigned love constituted many bodies as one and joined many souls into a single harmonious whole.³

² Basil, *St. Vladimir's Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series*, trans. C Paul Schroeder, vol. 38, *On Social Justice* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 70 and 86.

We live in a complicated world and the Wisdom in the Book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool, and Saint Basil's homilies from the fourth century can be difficult to apply to our lives today. But one scholar of Basil's homilies on Social Justice says, "**The heart of Basil's message is this: *Simplify your life, so you have something to share with others.***"⁴ We need not fear the top five regrets of those who are dying if we take Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool and Saint Basil's teachings to heart. We can courageously live lives that are generous and genuine; and not superficial presentations of vain, self-obsessed, pretentious egos others require us to perform. We can find joy, fulfillment, and deep satisfaction in the marrow of our bones when our work is grounded in our God-given purpose to love and serve and share with others, and not toil for the idol of greed, selfishly hoarding up possessions which eventually enslave and possess us. God's call to a simplified, generous life liberates us to invest in deep and abiding relationships with our families, friends, and neighbors. God's call to a simplified, generous life liberates us to express our feelings fearlessly and to speak the truth to one another in love. Finally, God's call liberates us to live a joyful life, without regrets, so that when we breathe our last, others will celebrate the abundance of love we shared. **Amen.**

⁴ *Ibid.*,13.