

Will and Anxiety
First Reading - Psalm 49:12-20
Second Reading - Luke 12:13-21

Momma had a gun. In fact, this Momma owned a few guns and bore two sons, so in writing her last will and testament, having put some thought into the distribution of her possessions, she concluded that upon her death the wayward and somewhat estranged son should receive Momma's weaponry and a few pieces of dime store art. The other son would receive everything else - the house, the car, the property, and the remains of the money market fund over at the credit union. However, somewhere along the journey toward Momma's demise, the brothers stopped speaking to each other, and so the chill at the graveside had nothing to do with the weather.

The wayward son, probably lacking in those skills requiring prudence, organization, and administration, would not have been up to the role of executor, so Momma had assigned that role to the dutiful son who visited on Mother's Day, and remembered to send a birthday card every June. Unfortunately, this son/executor would soon be diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer. Yet, he was determined to hold onto his role as executor of Momma's will. You see, he wanted the title of executor, but he had no intention of executing a portion of what Momma's will stipulated.

Remember, the brothers were not speaking to each other. Consequently, the purportedly responsible brother claimed that Momma had sold the guns and art that were supposed to go to the wild child, a lie he decided to die with in order to prevent his brother from inheriting anything from their dear departed Momma. Can't you hear him? *"I'd rather die than see my delinquent brother shootin' ducks with Momma's shotgun."* Blood may be thicker than water, but is very often thinner than pride or resentment or greed.

Consider the daughter who was called home to care for her ill father, apparently giving no thought to the notion that being a caregiver actually entails giving care. One night, the elderly and ill father had a bad fall and stopped breathing. So, the daughter's first thought was not to call 911, but to call the attorney who had written the father's will. The surprised attorney asked, "Have you called 911?" And the daughter says, "I'm going to get around to it." The attorney immediately hung up and called 911, surmising that the daughter was obviously in no rush to do that. Later, the daughter's brother discovered that his sister had conned their senescent father to transfer most of his bank accounts to her. *Daddy, you hang in there. I'll call the paramedic as soon as I get back from the bank.*

My brother-in-law, a seasoned small town attorney, shared these two accounts as recent examples of how cutthroat and mercenary family members quickly become when the subject is wills and estates.

“Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’” It would be helpful for us here to provide a little context for this encounter. Following his baptism by John, Jesus had been rather busy. Not much downtime for the savior. He held off the tempter in the wilderness. The folks in his hometown tried to kill him after his first sermon. He recruits his ragtag group of disciples, heals a few folk, comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, teaches and preaches about loving your enemies and not judging your neighbors, calms the stormy sea, feeds five thousand, foretells his death, commissions disciples and sends them out in mission, out blings Beyonce on a mountain top with Moses and Elijah, dines with Mary and Martha, introduces us to the Good Samaritan, teaches us to pray, and somewhere along the way, Luke tells us that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.

Set his face toward Jerusalem. Luke is signaling to us that from that point forward Jesus is preparing himself for the inevitable encounters and

consequences in Jerusalem while also preparing his followers for life after his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. He is giving them all these pearls of wisdom to live by — *“Ask and it will be given to you, search and you will find.”* *“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”* *“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on a lampstand.”* *“Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees.”* Jesus is a breathing, walking, talking proverb machine, and the crowd now numbers in the thousands, such that they are beginning to trample on one another, everyone drawn to these foundational words of life from the Lord.

So, amidst the clamoring crowd, as Jesus continues to give essential instructions to his disciples and the future church, one guy manages to snake, bump, and push his way through the teeming multitude, ignoring the ushers, and contorting his body to sneak through the disciples so he can get close enough to Jesus, not to hear, but to be heard. Is he here to plead for the healing of a dying friend; or maybe to commit himself body and soul to serve Jesus; or perhaps he’s here to deliver an emergency message to Jesus from his mother Mary?

No, the man has trekked, hiked, run, climbed, crawled, and bowling balled his way into Jesus' presence, interrupting an executive session between Jesus and his disciples to convey his desperate plea to the Lord Incarnate — *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”* Are you kidding me?

Jesus is preparing his followers for service in an often hostile world. There are Pharisees with nefarious intentions. There are Jesus followers who will be dragged before temple authorities to defend themselves. Jesus wants them to know that God will not abandon them and the Holy Spirit will equip them to face the challenges before them.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Where is this coming from? Jesus is not a lawyer. It's not like Jesus put a billboard out on the interstate — *Not getting your fair share? Call Jesus at 1-800-LAWSUIT. The Get Even Attorneys.* The request was so random, so disconnected to the moment. It would be like interrupting the Rolling Stones mid-concert — *Mick, I love your moves. Could you install my new water heater?* Jesus, taken aback by the randomness of the interruption, says — *“Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”* Not my mule; not

my plow. Not my golf ball, not my divot. Jesus is the Word made flesh, not a probate attorney.

Yet, though Jesus isn't planning on filing any motions with the clerk of court, he does recognize what is actually going on here. Before him is an individual focused solely, to the point of obsession, on the one thing he wants and feels he deserves but has not been able to acquire. It's not life; it's not health; it's not a vocation; it's not a family; it's not a purpose. It's a mutual fund, a CD Or maybe Grandma's gun collection. It's reminiscent of the film noir classic, *The Maltese Falcon*: Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, Sydney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre; *The stuff dreams are made of...* "In 1539 the Knights Templar of Malta, paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, by sending him a Golden Falcon encrusted from beak to claw with rarest jewels—but pirates seized the galley carrying this priceless token and the fate of the Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this day."

The movie follows a shady and shadowy cast of characters who have trekked back and forth across the globe, willing to shoot or be shot at, their whole lives limited to this one desperate search for the jewel encrusted bird

... and when they finally think they have it in their clutches, they discover it to be nothing more than a leaden doorstep.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Tone deaf and blind to the subject and atmosphere of the scene where he has landed, the man can only focus on this one thing that eludes his grasp. Emerson said that you become what you think about all day long. And if the object of your obsession is something you have convinced yourself you deserve, you become someone whose worldview shrinks, whose relationships are sucked into the toxic drain of your obsession, and whose contribution to the common good evaporates. It’s the Jesus quote to which everyone assents, but few follow — *“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”*

Jesus doesn’t dismiss what may be the man’s legitimate claim, but Jesus does diagnose the man’s more basic need. A person wrapped up in their wants to the exclusion of all else will be the smallest of packages. It could be Momma’s mutual fund; it could be the cover of Architectural Digest; it could be the tightening knot of resentment; it could be the narcissistic need for praise, yet in the end **it is** an egocentric obsession that

shrinks the world and strangles the spirit. Inevitably, it is a most lonely place.

The man may want a court order, and may well get one, but not from Jesus. Yet, if the man can hear what Jesus has to say, the burden of resentment will lighten, the world will brighten, and the good may well reveal itself.

Jesus seizes this teaching moment with a parable. *“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”*

It is not an unusual scenario, certainly not in our culture where 10% of the people own 70% of the wealth, and just the mention of income inequality sparks a heat wave between Independence and South Boulevard. *“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones.”* The castles vie with the storage facilities for who needs the bigger plot of land. The harvest is rich but the laborers are few, Jesus said, but would he add an appendix in our

part of the world? The storage units are stuffed but the affordable housing shrinks, the food bank is empty, and the free school lunch disappears.

Orson Welles was a notoriously complicated man, but the last scene of his magnum opus, *Citizen Kane*, was prophetic. A gaggle of reporters is gathered in the grand hall of Xanadu, the colossal castle of media mogul John Foster Kane. Following Kane's death, having breathed his last, alone and isolated amidst the dust covered and decaying splendor of his massive estate, reporter Jerry Thompson confesses to those gathered in the grand hall that he was unable to determine the mystery of Kane's last word - *Rosebud*. Thompson says, "Mr. Kane was a man who got everything he wanted and then lost it. Maybe *Rosebud* was something he couldn't get or something he lost."

The group exits the castle as the camera begins to pan out revealing that the grand hall is gorged with the accumulated possessions of Mr. Kane to be catalogued or discarded. It looks like a mega-sized episode of *Hoarders*, only the stacks and stacks of items are not newspapers, empty soup cans, and kitty litter boxes. Rather, the piles consist of statues, priceless artworks, extravagant furnishings, rare candelabras, and a single primitive

child's snow sled, bearing the brand name *Rosebud*. The sled is seen early in the film as an elementary aged Kane, outside his mother's simple mountain boarding house, enjoys a plain, unspoiled, unpretentious day in the snow, a father he knows and loves, soon to be displaced by a business-like guardian assigned to prepare Kane for a life of privilege, heir to a newly discovered gold fortune. *Rosebud* represented what he lost and could not buy or manufacture or coerce.

The camera fades and the movie concludes as a worker at the castle picks the sled up from a pile, and tosses it into the furnace to be burned. It is the 1941 cinematic version of Jesus' parable — *“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”*

The character in Jesus' parable is not a subsistence farmer but a wealthy landowner. The harvest was unexpectedly good, a surplus not

budgeted for. Yet, there is no thought of generosity or benevolence, no concept of “enough,” no thought of neighbors in need, of investment in the community, of commitment to the common good. The landowner, like the complainant before Christ, is only able to see one thing, self-interest. The mirror is so small, it doesn’t allow him to conceive of a world beyond his face, his impulses, his portfolio, his fears, his insecurities, his wants, his demands. The barns may be bigger, but the world is so much smaller. He’ll have plenty to eat and drink, but the “merry” is going to be more difficult to come by, because typically, merriment comes in the context of relationships, shared commitments, shared responsibility, helping one another, paying attention to the needs around you.

The driven single-minded brother had come into the presence of the light of the world, the bread of life, the shepherd who cares for the sheep, the redeemer of the world, yet he was unable to perceive anything but his own resentment toward his brother and the CD at the credit union. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.”

Rich toward God — What might that look like for you? Amen.