

Today at St. George's, we have the pleasure of witnessing the Holy Baptism of four of God's children. Two weeks ago, at the baptisms of Austin and Clarke Watts, I spoke about how when we participate in another person's baptism, it is important to ask ourselves how much we value our own baptism. I won't repeat myself today, beyond encouraging all of us to take a few minutes at some point later today to ask and answer the question, "What does my baptism mean to me?"

This morning I want to focus on two stories, neither of which is about baptism specifically. Both stories are about trusting God. Learning to trust God is at the heart of baptism. Learning to trust God with the infinite variety of highs and lows, the joys and sorrows, that enter our lives, is at the heart of being a Christian. The four children being baptized today – Charlotte, Darcy, Mackenzie, and Theodore – are at the point in their lives when they are completely dependent upon and trust their parents above all else. As they grow older, we pray that they will learn to trust and depend upon God as well.

The first story:

A mountain climber got lost high up on a cliff late at night. It was pitch black. The moon and stars were covered by clouds and the man could not see anything. Suddenly, he slipped and started tumbling uncontrollably down the mountain. Falling ever faster he was terrified that any second he would crash to his death. In a flash, he recalled all the good and the bad episodes of his life. Suddenly, he felt the safety rope that was tied to his waste pull tight, his fall was broken and he was dangling in the air. Still unable to see a thing, he had no idea how far above the ground he was hanging. With only the rope holding him, the man screamed "Help me, God!" Immediately, a deep voice rumbled from the heavens, "What do you want me to do?" "Save me, God!" the climber hollered. God replied, "Do you really think I can save you?" Desperate and pleading the man called out, "Of course I believe you can!" God said, "Then cut the rope tied to your waist."

There was a moment of silence, as the man concluded that he could not trust God that much. He chose instead to hold on to the rope with all his strength. The next morning, the rescue team sent to search for the missing climber reported that he was found dead and frozen, his body hanging from the rope that he was still clinging onto. In the inky blackness of the night, when the climber had called out to God, he did not realize that when the rope broke his fall he was only one foot above the ground and could have been saved if only he had cut the rope.

It turns out the man was a fool for thinking that only he could save himself. Failure to trust in God cost him everything, even his life.

Today's gospel reading is the second story. It has been called the parable of the Rich Fool. It begins with a man asking Jesus to arbitrate in a dispute over a family inheritance. The man wants Jesus to command the brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Refusing to be drawn into the dispute, Jesus instead tells this story:

There was a rich man who possessed land that produced so abundantly he had a problem finding enough places to store all his crops. Pondering his options, the man decided to tear down his existing barns and build bigger ones capable of housing all his grain and other goods. He believed that once his new and larger barns were filled, his future would be secure for many years to come and he could "relax, eat, drink, and be merry." Then God speaks to the man, calling him "You fool!" and warning him that this very night he will die.

The man is presented by Jesus as a fool because he trusted that his life's purpose and security depended upon his many possessions. Jesus does not denigrate the man for being wealthy, because it is no crime to be rich. There is no suggestion that the man is a bad person who acquired his wealth in unethical ways or thought himself better than other people who possessed less than him. The man thinks his problem is that he lacks sufficient space to store the tremendous harvest that life has given him. Jesus points out that the man's real problem is his soul; he is filled with covetousness, which is the greedy desire to possess things solely for one's own benefit. The man trusts that material things alone can fill his life and his soul.

In his private musings the rich man thought only of himself and his wealth. He did not thank God for his prosperity. He did not consider what God would have him do with this blessing of abundance. All his thoughts are directed toward himself. During that brief conversation with himself, he referred to “I” and “my” eleven times. He is exclusively self-centered. He does not appear to consider even for a moment how his prosperity might be used to benefit others.

We should not conclude that in telling this story Jesus is casting a negative light on our need to own certain things. Jesus clearly was aware that people have physical needs: we require food, and shelter, and many other things to survive. It was Jesus, after all, who taught us to pray for these very things: “Give us this day our daily bread,” he said we should pray. However, Jesus recognizes that when we are successful due to our labor and our good fortune it is quite easy to become trapped and controlled by these gifts/

In telling this story of the Rich Fool, Jesus reminds us that the purpose of a person’s life should never be defined solely by their earthly possessions. If we trust too much in our many possessions, we overlook the fact that our lives ultimately are dependent on the will of God. We are always at risk of becoming possessed by our possessions and failing to consider how we might better use our gifts and good fortune for the benefit and needs of others.

It is easy to fall into the trap of regarding our possessions as part of a zero-sum approach to life, which is the idea that if I possess something then I win, and others lose. By contrast, as Christ teaches, all the things that matter most in this life, like love, and relationships, and justice, and wisdom, and trust – these all increase as we share them. They are not to be hoarded selfishly. Christ’s way is the opposite of a zero-sum approach to life, because by sharing our gifts and good fortune, we win when others win.

G.K. Chesterton said that when we “cease to worship God, it is not that we worship nothing, because then we will worship anything.” In the place of God we erect flawed idols to receive our praise and trust.

Life itself is a gift from God, and as Jesus teaches us in the parable of the Rich Fool, material possessions alone can never secure our future. Ultimately, our only true source of security is the spiritual freedom that comes from a trusting relationship with God. Yet trusting in God requires that every now and again we need to risk cutting the rope and setting ourselves free from all the other stuff and other ideas that we have spent a lifetime believing are the key to our future happiness and wellbeing.

Today we baptize Charlotte, Darcy, Mackenzie, and Theodore. We pray that as they grow in life, so too will they grow in their willingness to trust that God is the source of all good things that give their lives meaning. In the meantime, we pray that the rest of us renew our own trust in our God of perfect love. **Amen.**

8th Sunday after Pentecost

31 July 2022

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming