Homily, 31 July 2016
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (114)
Ecclesiastes 1:2,2:21-23; Psalms 90:3-4,5-6,12-13,14,17; Colossians 3:1-5,9-11; Luke 12:13-21

“Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.”

The rich man in today’s parable had a very good year -- and so he gave some thought to how to preserve what he had gained. He was understandably delighted that his future seemed secure. But God said to him, “You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you.”

Ouch!
This parable is challenging for someone who is beginning to think about retirement. I’ve listened to advice and have saved enough so that I ought to be okay when I retire. But sometimes I wonder: am I simply being frugal, or am I being a little too cautious and self-centered. What would God say to me?

A few years ago I took a course on Catholic Social Teaching. We studied all the social encyclicals from the last 125 years, beginning with Rerum Novarum, which was written in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII.

There was a particular section in it that has always stayed with me. It begins by quoting Thomas Aquinas:

“Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need.”

Which is basic Christian teaching, but then Pope Leo continues:

“... no one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs and those of his household; nor even to give away what is reasonably required to keep up becomingly his condition in life, for no one ought to live other than becomingly. But, when what necessity demands has been supplied ... it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over.” [RN 22]
It's common sense, of course, but it was nice to see it stated so clearly. You have to provide for those who depend on you. You may voluntarily choose to live a life of holy poverty, but you can't force others to do the same -- certainly not your spouse and children. That is a good place to begin -- but the Pope put some tension in what he wrote and we have to struggle with it.

What is a necessity? What is required? How often do we ask ourselves, “do we have enough?” And what if others cannot live in a manner that is 'becoming' to their situations?

How often do we tell ourselves that although we aren't poor, we don't really have anything to spare? How often do we play the fool?

Before Janet and I were married, we talked about how we wanted to raise our kids. Janet wanted to stay home with the kids until they were in school. Although it meant finances would be tight, we stuck to that plan. We never had much savings, though I had a good job with great health insurance. We seemed to live paycheck to paycheck. Unexpected expenses such as a major car repair were small disasters.

One Sunday morning during these years we were at mass. When the time came for the collection, the ushers would walk down the aisle with a collection bag on long pole. As the usher came toward our pew I checked my wallet. It was empty. I hadn't bothered to check before coming to church.

Now the usher who was coming our way that morning was a man I knew and respected. Not only did I know him, he knew me. He knew where I worked and knew I had a decent, steady job.

He held the bag out to me. I just looked at it. I didn’t put anything in. Then I looked at him. Though he tried to hide it, I could tell he was disappointed in me and even a little sad. I felt ashamed and I deserved it. As tight as things were, I knew we could afford to give something.

So Janet and I talked about it. We promised that that would never happen again. As tight as things were, we knew we had it better than a
lot of people. And eventually, when Janet went back to work, things would be even better. So we started giving something each Sunday, not as an afterthought, but intentionally.

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Giving alms, tithing, these are an important aspect our faith and part of Catholic Social Teaching, but we have to go beyond simply giving alms. Jesus said ‘Take care to guard against all greed.’

Sometimes donations of money or food are needed, but these usually solve short term problems. To work for the common good, to protect the most vulnerable in our world, also takes time and action. We can be greedy with things besides money. I can be greedy with my time just as much as I can be greedy with my money, maybe more so.

It’s important to have some down time, to get exercise, to play, to read a book, pursue a hobby, ... to pray. It’s also important to make sure that everyone in your household has opportunities to do the same. But do we go beyond what is necessary, what is needed? When is it enough?

When there is a need, can we share our time without hesitation? Be generous to your family, your friends, your neighbors. Help when there is a need. Volunteer in the parish. Be concerned for the common good and show solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. Be a conscientious citizen. Study the issues, the candidates -- from the local school board to the national offices. Then be sure to vote. Don’t be selfish with your time or your attention.

“Take care to guard against all greed,” said Jesus, “for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.”

That’s not actually a condemnation of wealth, but of what people do -- or fail to do -- with the wealth they have. Money, possessions, property, hobbies, retirement plans: these are necessities. They support us in our life of faith, but they do not define it. What does define our life of faith is our love of God and our love of neighbor. Keep that in mind. Don’t be the ‘fool.’