



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

## ***Rich Towards God\_ - The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost - 7\_31\_2022***

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life giving God. Amen.

So I recently returned from summer vacation and it was wonderful. I completely turned off email for three weeks. Amen. Amen! Amen! And I was able to spend some quality time with the girls. We played silly games in the backyard. We took trips to the park. We swam in Grandma's pool. It was so nice to get some, some uninterrupted time with them. And there were more than a few times when I felt a little like Jesus in our gospel today.

You see, over the course of five birthdays and five Christmases, our twin girls have amassed what I would describe as an ample collection of dolls and toys and stuffed animals, Barbies, you name it. And yet somehow despite an overwhelming abundance, that is right under their nose, somehow they always manage to end up fighting over the same doll, which eventually leads them to me to ask to figure out who should get it. And I have to say, you know, it's kind of hard to watch your kids fight. It's sort of heartbreaking to see them go from loving sisters who just moments earlier were laughing and singing and having a wonderful time, to turning on a dime into hysterical Black Friday shoppers, locked in a tug of war over the last Cabbage Patch Doll on earth, it seems.

I try to tell them, "You know, come on guys. This is crazy. You have a whole room full of other dolls, play with something different." I even get Buddhist on them. I say, you know, Gianna, you're just causing your own suffering with all this attachment. Hello? I cite the Dalai Lama. I try to explain, "Aleena, the key to joy is not fighting over the things you don't have. It's about being thankful for the things you do have." I even summarized today's gospel of sorts and reminded them that Jesus taught us over and over that happiness will never be found in possessions, but in relationships with real people like your sister.

Ah, but it all falls on deaf ears. Surprise, surprise. They don't want spiritual wisdom. They don't want universal truth. They want me to be the judge and decide who should get the doll. Okay. Fine. Well, unlike Jesus, I don't have the presence of mind, so I decide who gets the doll. I put on my arbitrator hat and I try to interrogate them and figure out, okay, who had the doll first? Who put it down for a moment? How long was it? Because there's like a statute of limitations involved in there somewhere. It goes on like this and they all have a story. And eventually when I do finally make a decision, it only makes one of

them mad at me now. And yes, before you suggest it, throwing the doll out the window, it only makes matters worse. Okay? Trust me on that.

Okay. So thankfully, I attended our Lent series earlier this year and I learned from our theologian in residence, James Alison, that my girls are suffering from what is apparently an acute case of mimetic desire. That is a theory of human behavior developed by French anthropologist, René Girard. And if you missed the series, let me just summarize it this way. It turns out, keeping up with the Joneses, it's not just a feature of modern consumer culture, but it's something that has actually been with us since the very beginning.

It seems that much of our desire for things is based, not on whether we really need it, but on whether others want it. And this results in a kind of manufactured scarcity that drives our fears and can even turn violent. Put another way, in the immortal words of Dr. Seuss, we really are just Sneetches on the beaches, desperately wanting stars upon thars. Well, until everybody else has one. And then we go to our fix-it-up chappie to sell us the next "in" thing. Gerard considered mimetic rivalry as humanities fundamental sin, because it drives us to seek fulfillment in things rather than God. And that only turns us inward and sets our lives on a course of endless self-centered fulfillment seeking, even turning brother against brother as in our gospel today.

Of course, this probably isn't a revelation to most of us. I think we all know that seeking happiness in riches, things, or status is ultimately an empty pursuit. Most of us grew up hearing this basic wisdom. It can be found in classic films like Citizen Kane, The Godfather, Wall Street, and of course, Charles Dickens', A Christmas Carol, which itself has been retold countless times in countless ways, my favorite being Groundhog Day with Bill Murray. Yeah?

This is the one where the Scrooge character is a hopelessly narcissistic TV personality, who through some kind of an unexplained time warp relives the same day over and over, allowing him to manipulate the world and the people around him so that he finally gets all the stuff, all the fame, all the notoriety he ever wanted. Only, it never works out like that. In all these stories, the pursuits of wealth or success comes at a terrible cost. Rather than eat, drink, and be merry, our protagonists lose their families, drive away their friends, and end up facing a lonely desolate life. Outwardly successful, perhaps, but inwardly empty.

So the question posed by our gospel today, it seems to me, is this: if we all know this already, if it's all been so well researched, if it's all been so embedded in our cultural and religious wisdom, why? Why do we still struggle with it? If it is all just vanity, why do we still chase after wind? Why are fights over money at the heart of most divorces? Why do we spend more time shopping than playing with our children? Why do we carry so much debt and so little savings? Why is the wealthiest country in the history of the world who has put people on the moon unable to afford basic shelter for God's people or healthcare for His children?

And if you think money itself is the problem, look no further than the monastic communities who, despite vows of poverty, giving up all their possessions, even they will get into fights over a missing book or a borrowed tea kettle, or whatever it is that monks fight over. And then like my girls, they go right into the abbot to settle it. No, the best explanation for why we keep trying, despite knowing that money does not buy happiness is that, well, sometimes it does.

In the book, *Your Money or Your Life*, Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez, point to studies showing that when we are starting out in life and purchasing the basics, clothing, food, your first apartment, your first car, the more money we spend on things, the more money we spend on the basics of life at first, it really does bring a sense of fulfillment and happiness. The problem comes as we continue in life and we head up the ladder of success and we continue going, continue accumulating more and more. And as we do the fulfillment we receive, well, it starts to level off.

And that kind of makes sense, right? The first pair of shoes, it has a lot more value to us than the, the 10th or the 20th or the - come to my house sometime. But like most Americans, we keep going and soon enough we need bigger barns ourselves, filling our garages and our basements with more than just things, things that have become now clutter. The problem, they conclude, isn't that money never buys happiness. The real problem is knowing when to stop. The real problem is never stopping to ask ourselves when is enough enough?

And I think that's the issue that Jesus is raising today. It's not how much stuff we own that matters. It's how we hold it that counts. Do we hold it lightly? Do we share it readily? Do we give from it generously? Are we okay with letting go and downsizing when the time is right? Or are we consumed by our own consumption? Do we confuse our identity with our things and hold them tightly, locking away our wealth and storing up our very lives?

Jesus is inviting each of us to discern for ourselves where are we in the pursuit of happiness? Are we letting money and success get in the way of our ability to give ourselves away? Are we still investing in things rather than relationships? Like my girls, the man in the crowd wants Jesus to settle a dispute between brothers, this time over an inheritance. And like a loving parent watching his children's fight, I know that this breaks his heart as well. Brother turning against brother over money. Turning what should be an occasion for remembrance and gratitude and celebration and stories into a moment of distrust and division.

And so more wisely than I, Jesus refuses to get dragged in and instead says, who made me your judge? And yes, you heard that, right? Jesus is not here to judge us. He comes to transform us so that we might discern for ourselves that salvation has always been about people, never possessions. He wants us to grow up and to stop fighting and striving for childish things, so that we might discover the true abundance that has been under our nose all along.

Jesus doesn't want to sort out who's right, or who gets what, or how much. He wants us to become good at noticing when our fears are getting the best of us. And in those moments, rather than tighten our grip, to loosen it so that we might regain our perspective and put God first, once more. He's not interested in who wins our fights over money or things, or how successful we become. He's only interested in how rich toward one another we can be. And in so doing, be rich in God.

Amen.