

Possessing

It's wonderful to be back with you after these two months away.

Kerry and I missed you dearly.

We're deeply grateful for Fr Greg and Mother Imelda and for Fr Mafi and Fr Fan who cared for the spiritual needs of our congregation during this entire summer.

And thank you for the fabulous work of our Senior and Junior Wardens, our Treasurer, and each and every Vestry member.

And dear Martha!

Not to mention the Saturday morning breakfast crew and the volunteers at Wallyhouse, who ensured bellies got filled and groceries made available to those in need!

We are a community of leaders — and I couldn't be more proud of you.

You kept the good ship St Elizabeth's not just afloat, but prospering in ministry, compassion and kindness!

So, what surprises does Jesus have for us this morning?

As usual, he welcomes us all back together again with a doozy of a gospel lesson!

"Nice to see you all," he seems to be saying.

"Now, let's get back to work!"

Shall we?

Now I'm pretty sure that any rational person listening to today's gospel lesson has gotta be thinking to herself:

"Huh?"

What on earth is Jesus talking about today?

Does he really mean that for Father's Day and Mother's Day we have to go buy the Hallmark cards that say:

"I hate you mom!"

"I hate you dad!"

You'd think that'd be enough outrage for one morning.

But Jesus is just getting warmed up!

He goes on to say that if we want to be his followers, we not only have to send those kinds of cards on the holidays, but we also need to drag around an electric chair wherever we go.

Well, he talks about dragging around a cross.

But a cross is just his generation's horrific execution device.

Ours?

It's the electric chair!

"Drag an electric chair around with you everyday, if you want to follow me," he insists.

And then, we get to the cherry on the cake!

If you want to follow me, give up all your stuff.

Now, let's take a poll this morning.

Are you a follower of Jesus?

Hands please!

Now let's see the hands of everyone here who has stuff.

Hands please.

In both cases, every hand in the joint goes up!

So what's going on?

Well, maybe we need to start with the very last line of Jesus' gospel lesson today.

The one where he says, "give up your possessions."

Remember always, context is key.

Jesus is always inviting us to dive deeper into what he's getting at.

"Don't be satisfied with just the surface, the so-called 'literal' meaning," he cautions.

Which is why scripture stands the test of time, bearing the weight of thousands of years.

Because it is immeasurably deep.

Always calling to us to look closer, and beyond.

To embrace the humility that prays: "every day, please make me a beginner."

Which happens every time I'm willing to let go of what I think is true — so that God can guide me into her depths.

So, what IS the context?

Jesus is talking with people who aren't living in a consumer society.

No one's walking around with AirPods or iPads.

There's not a Tesla in sight.

In fact, most of the folks Jesus is speaking with today own not much more than the clothes on their back, a few simple tools for farming or a trade, and maybe some sandals for walking in.

So perhaps Jesus isn't talking so much about giving up "stuff" — as he's zeroing in on giving up "the **attitude** of possessing."

Think about it.

If we give up all of our stuff, what have we done?

We have engaged in an act.

And once that act is accomplished, we won't have any more stuff.

But here's the rub.

Will our insides be changed?

Our thoughts?

Our values?

How we relate to others?

Probably not.

But by slowly learning to release the desire, the need, the compulsion to possess, a spiritual, mental and emotional change can begin.

After all, the need to possess is as instinctively human as the need to breathe.

Isn't possessing the first thing we do when we're born?

Look at any newborn infant.

It can barely see.

It doesn't understand language.

It certainly can't speak.

And yet, one loud cry sends a nursing mom's milk rushing through her breasts.

Every infant "possesses" their mom.

And as we grow older, we get even better at possessing.

Sometimes it's fear or jealousy or envy that motivates the need to possess.

And as a consequence, relationships become twisted and distorted whenever one or both partners need to possess the other one.

Isn't that the insight Paul shares with us this morning?

Philemon is a slave owner.

Onesimus is a slave.

And Paul implores Philemon to give up possessing this other human being.

To instead see him not as an object to possess, but as a fellow human being, made in the image and likeness of God.

Perhaps that's what Jesus is getting at when he talks about our attitude toward our parents.

Because, heaven knows, families are often cesspools of possessing.

Of insecurity.

Of jealousy.

These ugly fruits of possessing twist and distort who we are each of us called to become.

"Don't make an idol of your family," Jesus is saying this morning.

“Don’t worship family!”

Or tribe.

Or nation.

Possessing people and things is all about creating a zone of protection and security.

But it’s a false protection.

A false security.

It’s one that cannot stand the test of time.

It cannot endure.

Which is how Jeremiah fits into this morning’s puzzle.

Because this young prophet reminds us that as much as we think we’re in charge of our lives, of this life, of each other’s lives, we are simply clay in the hands of the loving Potter.

Jeremiah implores us to trust that loving Potter.

Jeremiah beckons us to open our eyes to the marvelous truth that — in the grand scheme of things — God’s wisdom and vision for all of God’s good creation — shall not be defeated.

It’s a wisdom and vision that sweeps through the universe.

It sweeps through this galaxy.

This good earth.

Through you — and through me — as well.

If we can grow in trust in the goodness of that Potter, by letting go and letting things be, our eyes slowly open to the life of freedom that awaits all people.

By taking that step into the flow of life, we allow it to take us to the beautiful and sublime places that await all of us.

And yet Jesus knows how deeply ingrained the need to possess is in every one of us.

Which is why, I think, he chooses words that act like a sock in the eye.

A punch to the gut.

Because he knows we need to wake up to the reality of how we actually live our life — before we can wake up to the life that is life — a life of transformation, release, surrender.

Today's hard words from Jesus are like the farmer who smacks the mule over the head with a 2 x 4.

"Why'd ya do that?" the neighbor yells.

"To get his attention," the farmer replies.

Today, Jesus is the farmer.

We are the mule.

Today, Jesus invites us, this day and this week, in no uncertain terms, to practice giving up our need to possess.

To begin to let go of the attitude that says: "I own you."

Whether that attitude shows up in our relationships with our significant others.

Or in how we interact with our co-workers and friends.

Or in the living out of our political persuasions.

Can we practice giving up "the need to possess?"

For lo and behold, when we do, at that very moment, we find **ourselves** possessed — by the loving hands — of the loving Potter.

Which becomes, ironically, the only thing that truly sets us free.

+amen