

Proper 13-C
August 5, 2007
Ward Bauman
St. John's Church

Last Wednesday afternoon and evening I had meetings until about 9 PM. Picking up my cell phone I saw that I had several people trying to contact me. My daughter Haleh, on the East Coast called asking where I was. Are you OK? She said. This was the first I heard about the collapse of the I-35 bridge. I also received a call from my friend David, who is in Virginia visiting his father. "I didn't think you would be in the Twin Cities tonight, but I wasn't sure", he said. My father called from California, as did my sister and one of my other daughters. I suppose this behavior was experienced by many of us. It was a shock across our nation – a reminder that life is very fragile and that in the twinkling of an eye a tragedy can take any of us at any time.

This is, of course, what the wisdom teachers have told us since the dawn of history. The book of Ecclesiastes quotes the "Teacher", who in old age is concluding, with some despair, that everything he's worked to accomplished can be snuffed out in a second and is, therefore, vanity and simply a "chasing after wind".

I once had a friend who, in a tragic accident, nearly died. But after months of recovery, he said, he had, at last, put his life in perspective and was living everyday now as if it were his last; spending more time with his children, doing more charitable work, attending to his spiritual focus and disciplines. He also changed his job, wanting less money and more time for other priorities. This isn't uncommon in such circumstances.

I recently saw Al Gores film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which he tells the story of his sons accident and near death and how it prioritized his life's work and purpose; helping him realize that there was one most important task that he had to do; and that was to help guide this nation toward right decision making in regards to the health of our planet and how we are to live on this earth. He feels an urgency to fulfill his unique mission, because of the knowledge he has gained over years of education and research. Each of

us has a mission in life, if we could only have the experience that helps us realize what it is.

Some years back I went to hear a lecture by professor of philosophy Jacob Needleman, the author of *“Lost Christianity”* and other books that I have enjoyed. The gist of his lecture was that we are here on earth, each of us, with a divine purpose. That’s what all of our great religious traditions have told us, and the important task, in fact, the most important task that any human being can undertake is to discover what that mission is. He said there’s only one primary quest for each human and that is to answer the basic question: “Why am I here?” If we can answer that question we will have fulfilled our life’s purpose, he said. He told us that his favorite work was speaking with high school students. “He asks them if they know why they are here,” because no one else seems to be asking them that primary question. Our religious organizations should be doing that - helping our children to know the answers, but few do. He told us that children are eager to seek the answer to this one important question: but there are few adults who can help them find the answers.

During the lecture a woman in the middle of the auditorium raised her hand and asked, “Dr. Needleman, when I return home and my teenagers ask me why they are here and to what purpose, how do I help them answer their question?” After a pause, Dr. Needleman replied: “Madam, you must first answer that question for yourself!”

You see, NOT knowing the answer many of us spend our life-time wasting our purpose here on earth. We are here for a specific reason, and we need to know clearly what it is, so that we can put our energies and talents into that one single purpose.

Jesus once told a parable to make the point. God’s work in our lives, he said, is like a pearl merchant who in looking for fine pearls comes upon one that is prized above all the others. Wanting that one, priceless pearl, he goes home and sells everything he has, **everything**, and returns and purchases that one most valuable pearl. Our quest for this divine purpose is like that pearl. When we come to really see why we are here - why

God has placed us here on earth - we too will get rid of everything else that doesn't matter, in order to attend to the one thing that absolutely does matter.

This message is contained in the parable we read today as well. A man comes to Jesus, wanting a wiser person to arbitrate a dispute between he and his brother over their inheritance. Jesus was disgusted by the waste of a life's pursuit. He saw it as a priority; either one spends one's life and life's remaining energies trying to acquire status, riches and power; or one can see the real purpose and then become "rich in God." Do you understand his meaning? Do we get it? It isn't enough to be religious, or to be baptized, or to be good. Good people too waste their lives, and Jesus is here challenging good, religious people; to invest in God.

T.S. Eliot in his poem *East Coker* speaking from his middle-aged view-point says:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years-
 Twenty years largely wasted . . .
 Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
 Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure . . .
 And so each venture is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
 Undisciplined squads of emotion
 And what there is to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once or twice, or several times, by [those] whom one cannot hope
 To emulate – but there is no competition –
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
 That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
 For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

So, what does Jesus mean when he challenges us to become "rich in God"?

We live in an age where we are inundated with the riches of spiritual knowledge. Everyone seems to have some spiritual map and is plying their spiritual wares. But these maps mean nothing to us, if we don't know where we are and how to use our maps. We soon learn that there is no standard map – they aren't all the same. Each

map is only good for those who know where they are. A map of Baghdad won't help us if we're trying to find our way through Minneapolis. We can't emulate others who have navigated through their lives, we must find the road clear before our own. Jesus is inviting us, each one of us, to learn to see the truth through our own eyes – and to travel that road ourselves. Once someone asked Jesus if many would be saved? And he replied: "Try to come in through the narrow door. Many, I tell you, will try to enter and won't succeed."

When Jesus tells the parable about the rich land owner who wanted to tear down his old barns and build larger ones in order to store more crops, he wasn't castigating capitalists who want to make more money, but rather was pointing out that those who don't equate God with the totality of their lives think they can secure the future through their investments. The problem, of course, is that this doesn't take into account that God is with us here and now. We don't need to focus on securing the future, but rather, knowing that God is with us now, we need to be present to the One who opens life to us at this moment. Fear causes us to spend our energy securing the future, faith, on the other hand, opens the present moment to God who is with us now. This is becoming "rich in God", as he put it, because being in God one has the totality of what one needs already. Nothing happens to us, no disaster, no experience, where God is not with us. And even when disaster comes, including death, when one is already IN God, there is no fear. This was Jesus' primary message.

You and I are invited to learn for ourselves what our authentic spiritual work is; bringing our lives into full blossom and fruition. And we must keep in mind that the map itself is not the goal, but rather only the guide to the real work of awakening to God. This is the only way we can know what God is asking of us. One Hassidic tale tells of Rabbi Zusha telling his students: "When I die, God will not ask me, was I like Moses or was I like Joshua in my life. He will ask me, was I Zusha." Our task, in becoming "rich in God", is to know God's purpose for us, and to attend to it with our whole being.