

The Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 26, 2010

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There was a wonderful musical years ago called *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was set in a shtetel, a Jewish village in Russia called Anatevka, in the late nineteenth century, the principal character being Tevye, the milkman.

Tevye is poor, his life is hard, and he's a dreamer; he dreams of being rich.

One of his songs is "If I were a Rich Man." He lives in a hovel and dreams of a big house with real staircases, but primarily he dreams of having prestige and being respected, dreams of having "a seat by the Eastern wall" in the synagogue. That's where the rich men sit. They are symbolically closest to Jerusalem and, therefore, closest to God.

Tevye dreams that people would ask him questions about important matters, about Torah, the Law, weighty philosophical and religious questions, and take his answers seriously. He sings, ". . . it wouldn't matter if I answered right or wrong; if you're rich they think you really know."

In Tevye's world, and in the world of all those Pharisees listening to Jesus, being rich indicates God's special favor. Where do you suppose that idea came from?

It all began with a very simple statement made by God to Israel: "I will be your God, you will be my people." That's a promise to guide them, protect them, and particularly to enrich them with land and crops and power and wealth, and lots and lots of people.

It's quite simple to reason backward to that statement and say that if I am rich, I must be very special in God's favor; if I am rich, it's a sign. Cause and effect are reversed; it's called reasoning *post hoc, propter hoc*.

By the same logic, if being rich proves that you are beloved of God, then not being rich is proof of the opposite: poor men such as Tevye must be rejected by God; otherwise they too would be rich. So, if God rejects them, who am I to contradict God, says the rich man.

Of course it's wrong. It's a distortion of the Law, a distortion of the commandments, but by the time of Jesus, it was a very old and generally accepted distortion. Even the poor people believed it. "If you're rich, they think you really know."

Actually, in many ways Jesus' teaching isn't really so revolutionary. His teaching isn't new; it's a reassertion of things that had been known long ago and had been forgotten. It's a calling back to a concern, a responsibility for others that had been at the very roots of the traditions of the Jewish people, a calling to compassion that had been supplanted over time by rationalized self-interest. When Jesus says that He has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, that not one line of all that is past will be lost, He is calling Israel to that ancient relationship to God and to each other. That's a good message to hear once in a while. The world does tend to forget.

Many who were immersed in self-interest, such as some of those Pharisees, would not be swayed, even by the Resurrection, someone returning from the dead as the absolute demonstration of God's compassion and care for His children that is the model for our care for one another. God's care and compassion is without qualifications and conditions. That's what He calls us to.

In His Holy Name.