



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Rector

The Theology of Blue Jasmine

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 4, 2013

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 12:13-21

"And Jesus said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'" In the name of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Well, isn't that great? It is a Sunday in August and you have come to church, which, far from insignificant, is in itself worth celebrating. And so what do we have for this morning: a sermon about greed. Really? Is that truly smart thinking on the part of the church? It seems that in the summer, particularly in August, we ought to hear only light, happy stories, Jesus bouncing babies on his lap, rescuing lost sheep and carrying them all the way home himself, turning water into wine and partying with his friends. But, oh, no: we have to talk about greed—and, from Paul, a few other of the church's perennial hit parade just to stir the mix: fornication, impurity, passion, and evil desire—as though greed alone were not enough. You will be relieved to hear that I plan to deal only with greed!

Last week Woody Allen's latest movie, *Blue Jasmine*, opened in New York and LA. It is his best in many years, certainly since *Match Point*; if you can bring yourself to go, do so; and when you do, think about what God says to the rich fool in the parable from the gospel: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you."

Blue Jasmine is one part *A Streetcar Named Desire* and several parts a stylized version of the Bernie Madoff story. And though some of Jasmine's lines, each one delivered flawlessly by Cate Blanchett, are hilarious, it is a deadly serious moral fable about greed. Horrified by ordinariness, Jasmine's adaptation or lack of it to her newly acquired status as penniless, former socialite is too sad and pathetic to ever be simply funny.

In this passage Jesus, not new to family systems, refuses to enter the squabble between two brothers regarding inheritance. It is the rare family which has not had some aspect of this drama played out in its midst. I have seen otherwise reasonable and decent families torn apart over fortunes large and small, and watched greedy characters emerge that seemed antithetical to the nice people I thought I knew. A distant relative of mine had a huge diamond drop which she wore around her neck all the time. It truly was lovely and admired by many, including her daughters. She once told me that she intended with her last breath to swallow it so that there would be no fighting about who got it when she died! I didn't have the heart to tell her they'd find a way.

Jesus tells a parable that is so timely that it is difficult to preach about it without being clichéd and trite—certainly without being preachy and largely unhelpful, the problem being so insidious among us at every turn that we have little conscious awareness of it. A rich man is so successful that he literally has nowhere to store all his crops and treasures. So he builds bigger and better places to store them, no doubt the newer ones having the latest attributes, climate control and remarkable security systems. Oh, the lengths to which we will go to keep our stuff.

So he says to himself, "Soul, you have enough to last for many, many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry." Is that so bad, we honestly wonder? It is not that making provisions, even generous ones, for the future is wrong; it is not that relaxing, eating, drinking and being merry is in itself wrong. Jesus enjoyed the relative wealth of some of his friends,

those affluent enough to provide him hospitality and pleasure, beyond simple comfort. The problem is that this rich man, who is the only person I can recall God referring to as a fool, assigned greater soul value to such commodities and activities than they could deliver. He was as rich as Croesus, but he was not, the scripture says, “rich toward God.”

A documentary last year titled, *The Queen of Versailles*, chronicled the story of Jacqueline and David Siegel’s thwarted attempt to build the largest private home in the United States. In the midst of building the monstrosity, the economy crashed, and this billionaire couple was unable to sustain the grotesquely ostentatious lifestyle they had been living. Huge storage bins crammed full of priceless artifacts, some lovely but cumulatively crass and just too over the top, were stacked crate upon crate in the house that remains unfinished. Like the “rich fool,” theirs was a tale that was difficult to watch. I was embarrassed for them—this couple whom I do not and never shall know—and also strangely and ambiguously uncomfortable, wondering about times when my own desires have taken me over the line.

We watch these stories of great excess, like *Blue Jasmine* and the Siegel documentary, in part because somewhere within we say to ourselves, “Well, at least I am not that bad.” And the good news is we aren’t, and I would even go so far as to say that most of us would not become that hideous even if we were given the opportunity for such overindulgence. But the bad news is that some of it lingers in us regardless of how much we have. If I were to ask for a show of hands of all who have imagined what they’d do with a sudden windfall of money, like winning the lottery or landing some outrageously successful deal, I’d behold a sea of hands and not believe the ones who were not raised. We have all done it. In my own version of the fantasy, I am remarkably generous, and St. Bart’s always comes out marvelously: the Stallings Dome at St. Bart’s. Isn’t that pitiful?

But the serious question we must ask ourselves, and we must ask it as though our lives depend upon it for they in fact do, is this, my brothers and sisters: in what possessions are we seeking to find our souls? Jesus said, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And though there is clear judgment for the rich man, there is also sadness. Like him, we will not find our lives, we will not find that for which we most earnestly yearn in larger and larger storage bins of any kind—not in richer bank accounts or in limitless collections. And I believe that saddens the heart of God.

I don’t have any answers for this dilemma, certainly not any that are genuine or new. I want security, too, and accumulating money is part of that. It just is. We all struggle with it, but what I know deep in my soul, even when I act as though I believe something else, is that real security and real joy do not come from an overabundance of material things but from being rich in God. There are no instant formulas that work. All of us will have to work out our salvation with regard to accumulations, one decision at a time about what it means to be rich in God. In part that must mean that we will never be truly centered, balanced people unless we live according to the values that are of God.

And what are they—these values of God? I believe that we are wired with the capacity to know what they are: decency, goodness, generosity, peacefulness, and kindness. Living rich in God is not all or nothing; it is not checking one box or the other once and for all; it is a journey in which we face decisions multiple times a day about how to live, about the values we truly embrace. Are they all about us or do they demonstrate our care for others? Do they reflect things that are eternal or things that rust and ruin? Which life do we want—the one that passes so quickly away or the one that lasts forever?

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
St. Bart’s, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022