

Timely topics, today's scriptures. In Hosea's writing, God's disappointment with God's children, Israel, is poignantly spelled out: “When Israel was a child, I carried him....loved him.... But then Israel- the people - turned their back on me, and worshiped other gods.... my anger would explode...but I will not destroy my child... Some day, I will bring my child home...” (Loose paraphrase of Hos. 11) A child turning his/her back on the parent. Many of us have touched this pain.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him...” All through the Bible, God declares God's love for God's people and God's hope that we will finally realize that we were made to love God. We cannot “DO” life on our own for very long... Even if you ace school and get a hot-shot job and marry and have great kids and a faithful spouse and are able to buy one of the fanciest houses in the town where you live, and you have friends and a positive outlook on life and everybody thinks you're a model citizen and you become president of every organization you ever join and make CEO and finally retire in absolute comfort at the age of 55 without even stubbing your toe or getting a speeding ticket, you need God. All of us, no matter how well we negotiate the paths of life, have mixed motives, hidden fears, and the need for forgiveness. All of us, no matter how healthy and blessed we are, will some day find that life fails us because of disease or accident or some other infirmity. We CANNOT do life on our own; we were not made to live without a life-giving source beyond ourselves: we find our true life in our relationship with God.

Israel turned its back on God and trusted in military alliances with other countries. The people said prayers to the Canaanite gods of fertility as they planted their crops, because their neighbors' crops seemed to grow better...Instead of trusting God and being faithful to God as God had commanded, they went with what seemed to produce results, what seemed to produce more “stuff.” By this, they lost their connection with their Life-Source.

Today's gospel reading starts off with one man upset that his brother wasn't dividing their inheritance fairly. He wanted Jesus to intervene and make things right. Jesus refused, and instead gave a stern warning to all of us not to invest ourselves very seriously in our “stuff.”... Then he told a story, which has been called the “Parable of the Rich Fool.”

The man is both rich and has many lands. In fact, he's so rich that he can tear down his old barns and build new ones, not just fill up the old ones and build additional storage. That's rich. But did you notice his words? “What shall I do... I will do ...and I will... and there I will... And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods paid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” God's response to this man: “Fool! This very night your soul is required of you...” “So it is,” Jesus said, “with the one who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

What does this scripture have to say to us? Perhaps we want to say it has nothing to say... That man was a “fool,” and we are not so foolish. For one thing, we are not so wealthy; many of us are just getting by. For another, look at us: *we're* in church! We have acknowledged God and God's claim on our lives. We can probably identify with the man who ran to Jesus hoping for his help in getting his brother to be fair, but that rich, self-absorbed man has little to do with us!

This week, after all the Convention reports and balloons, I read about famines in Ethiopia and lots of other places and heard of the devastating conditions for citizens who have remained in Syria. The words told of horrible conditions brought about by drought and oppression and terrorism, and of families with little hope for any future for their children.

I read the papers as I ate breakfast, with my dog eagerly waiting for me to finish my breakfast so that she could lick the remaining cereal milk, and I found myself in tears. What must it be like for God, as some of us have so much and others of his children collapse because of no food? What would WE feel, if we had two children, and one had plenty but refused to help the other who was having a hard time?

The Gospel message: Don't build larger barns to store up and hold onto all of your stuff. Remember that at any moment, your life may be demanded of you. "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

There's a "Southern" version of this story, and it has a much happier ending. Listen: "When Joseph Broadmore Stockton died, friends, neighbors and relatives filled the white board church with the bell tower and green shingles down at Lady Springs. The church yard on that summer afternoon was filled with cars and pick-up trucks and the black hearse from Plummer's funeral home which took him for the last time to the old home place three miles away. There he was buried in the family plot alongside mama and papa, as he always called his parents.

J.B., as his best friends called him, was a down-home dairy farmer who had inherited 2,500 acres from his daddy, and with hard work, and by marrying into money, and by negotiating some slick business deals that folks in these parts still talk about, he managed in the 68 years of his life to make himself a medium sized fortune for a South Carolina country boy.

When he died he was past president of the Holstein Breeders Association, a member of the board of directors of the Farmers and Merchants Bank, and a charter member of the Kiwanis Club.

Well, the list goes on, and it's all history now, and J.B. Stockton has gone the way of all flesh. Even though the granite marker over his grave is larger than most, it took the same amount of earth to bury him as any other departed soul.

There is a story they tell about J.B.; it may be apocryphal, maybe not, but it seems that back in '85 he went to Clemson's homecoming, partied harder than usual...that is, he drank too much, and had one nightmare of a dream in which he found himself at the gates of hell with the ole' boy, Satan himself, reading from the list of the shady business deals he had pulled off, plus, the way he had treated his aged mother the last two years of her life, and his lip service to church and paltry giving record, even his philandering on his wife... The list even had a dozen other things he couldn't remember doing, but was sure he had done.

The dream was terrifying. He said he could feel the heat, smell the burning sulfur, and see the hungry look on the devil's face with eyes of fire.

His friends kidded him, saying the reason he felt heat was he had the electric blanket on high that night; while one of his closest friends, Charlie Taggart, said: "Anybody that goes to Clemson games is bound to have nightmares."

At any rate, after that awful or fateful night in the Holiday Inn, back in the fall of '85, J.B. Stockton returned home a changed man. He started going to church regularly, something he had not done since his mother dragged him to Sunday school as a boy. He began to stay at home more, spending time with Betty Lou, his wife, and visiting the grandchildren. He gave \$30,000 to a small college that catered to minority students, and paid for nine stained glass windows in the little church at Lady Springs. He even cleaned up

his language and shied away from hard liquor, with the exception of a glass or two of homemade muscadine wine.

Some of J.B.'s closest friends said he "got religion" because the doctor told him he had a bad heart. Others said he was just like his father: he didn't "come to his senses" until six years before he died. J.B., however, insisted that it was the scary dream he had had, declaring: "It was the Lord's way of giving me a second chance." (Source unknown: I found it through Woody Eddins )

This story is more like Scrooge, satisfying because a guy got a warning and then a second chance. It ended well. But in Jesus' story, there is no second chance and little hope for the well-to-do farmer to see the part of life that he was missing. Instead we have the stern message: "This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are spiritually bankrupt." The wealthy fool apparently thought he had life pretty well sown up. He'd made his millions, and thought he had it made in terms of life. He was secure, self-satisfied, and self-serving.

In the story, the rich man does all the talking until the end, talking to and congratulating himself. When God finally speaks, the words seem harsh and cold. Fool, this night you will die! But perhaps these words are not so harsh or cold, but instead an honest statement of fact: Our lives do not go on forever. Each one of us will finally die. The things to which we cling for security can keep us from seeing that our true security, our only LASTING security, is in the God who loves us and who asks us to love him, the best we can, in return, by loving others. Loving God and loving others is the only fool-proof investment.

Jesus made it very clear, what God wants: "Love the Lord your God with all you have and are, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself." (Mark 12:30-31) How we do these two things determines the substance of our lives. Throughout the Bible, God made this same request, through the Ten Commandments, through scripture after scripture imploring folks to understand that loving God *cannot* be separated from caring for other people, and especially for those who are weak and powerless.

Our society tells us to buy into acquiring more stuff and building larger barns to hold it all. But we CANNOT finally produce our own security. The only way we can find security is by taking God up on the gift and a challenge offered to us through Jesus Christ: God loves you, even though God sees everything in you and knows every crummy and mean thing you have ever done. God loves you, and God wants you to ask God to help you to find a better way to live. None of us can earn God's love, but we can trust it, and deep inside of us the only thing that will really satisfy us and give us peace is to live out our lives in response to God's love, trusting and obeying what God has asked us to do.

We are called by God to be wise, to make sure our treasure is properly invested: to love God and love others. By this, we will become rich toward God and even in the midst of hardships and challenges, we will discover blessing and new life.

Let us pray: Holy God, you have blessed us with a rich and wonderful world, full of challenges and opportunities. By your grace, help us to see the lasting blessings of our lives, and show us how to be wise in our choices, in our words, and in our faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.