

“My Name Is Ted And One Day...”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

One of the constants of the home I grew up in, besides church and books and the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, was the sound of music, not really surprising since I had a father who was the organist and choir director of the small Lutheran congregation we belonged to. Besides the regular piano playing of my father, sister and one of my brothers, there was Bach, Mozart, Handel and Beethoven on the stereo until I became a teen. I love classical music, but I also need my Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, Rolling Stones, Tragically Hip, Arcade Fire and the like as a healthy balance.

One genre of music I could never really get into was country and western – until my days when I served as a pastor in the Ottawa Valley, where if it wasn't C and W it wasn't music. Well, the only way I was going to figure this out, was, I had to listen to it, as I often did when I had to drive into Pembroke and Ottawa to make my hospital visits. Besides you can't listen to the CBC all the time.

Anyways, country and western is still not my first choice but I came to love the lyrics – the songs about old beat-up trucks, dogs who never forsake you and unrequited love. The lyrics of one song I especially liked, the song started like this: “I want to be a cowboy and you can be my cowgirl.” I guess it was a love song, those words took me on a nostalgic trip back to the time, I wore a cowboy outfit, six-gun by my side.

However, the song never failed to remind me of something else, for the last line suddenly turned what had been a silly song into something serious. The singer said, “My name is Ted, and one day I'll be dead.” Whatever our names are, so it can be said of us. One day we'll be dead.

In telling a story about a rich farmer, Jesus said the same thing, in today's gospel reading. The farmer was blessed with abundant crops and needed to build bigger barns, but the farmer was not rich in the things of God. One day death called, and the farmer was not prepared for that reality. That's the story Jesus tells in the 12th chapter of Luke. We are here today, gone tomorrow. “My name is Ted,” the singer said, “and one day I'll be dead.”

How does that sound to you? People can react in all kinds of ways to the fact that one day our life will come to an end. What reaction do you have to that truth? When the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes thought about it, he exclaimed, “Unity of vanities!” and described life as chasing after the wind, he could get cynical, or depressed, or give up. We could decide that nothing really matters, and so we'll just pursue whatever pleasure we can find in any given moment. Jesus tells the story, however, not to depress us or to make us afraid, but rather to give us the right perspective, to help us keep all things in balance.

Let me explain what I mean. The farmer in the parable was blessed with good crops, but he never saw who was the source of those blessings. But that failed vision kept his life out of balance, as he neglected to notice the network responsible for his success.

Did he see any connection to the neighbours who purchased his produce? Did he perceive any partnership with the farm labourers who were faithful to their menial tasks? Was he aware of relationships at home that provided love and support? Finally, as he surveyed his vast farmland, did he delight in the handiwork of God in water, soil, and seed? Yes, this farmer in the parable was blessed with riches, but he never realized the poverty of his soul.

That's an easy mistake to make, isn't it? Don't you recognize that as typical of so many in our day? We live in a land of such abundance, and yes we've seen cycles of inflation, recession, "stagflation," and even depression come and go, and yet our national prosperity seems to roll right along. Even while the newscasts show gaunt faces and bloated stomachs of the starving masses in the Sudan, most of us in North America are blessed beyond measure. You could say that we are blessed beyond our deserving.

A few years ago "Harper's Index" compared the salary of basketball superstar Michael Jordan with that of a typical factory worker in Indonesia who makes the shoes Michael Jordan endorses. "Harper's Index" reported this interesting yet disturbing fact – the number of years it would take for that factory worker making Nike shoes to earn Michael Jordan's endorsement fee for just adding his name to the commercials – 44,492 years!

The point is not to put down sports superstars, or to ridicule the rich or to say that wealth is wrong. The point is simply to say our wealth can mislead us, and even betray us. What Jesus taught two thousand years ago is just as true today – "life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" for abundance can give a false sense of security and can even keep us poor in soul.

Of course, not all who are wealthy fall into that trap and we know that. A lot of good is done. Thank God for those people enriched with wealth who use it to bless others, to make this world a better place.

But do you see the contrast between these people who see their wealth as a blessing and use it as a blessing to the character in our gospel reading for today? The tragedy of the rich farmer in the story Jesus told is that he thought he had it all, he thought he could keep it all, but he never gave thought to the fact that one day he must leave it all. In other words, he was missing the perspective that comes from knowing our lives will come to an end, and since our lives will come to an end someday, that should have an effect on what we do this day.

There's another country and western song that echoes these same thoughts. Garth Brooks, in "If Tomorrow Never Comes," sings of his regrets for not having told the loved ones in his life how much he loved them. He promised himself to tell his special friend each day how much she means to him, because then she will know how much he loved her "if tomorrow never comes."

I don't mean to be maudlin about it, but Garth Brooks's song, like the teaching of Jesus in Luke, asks us to sort out what is truly important to us from what is not, what should deserve our time, our love, our selves. It is so easy to get caught up in the pursuit of things that don't really matter in the long run. It is so easy to postpone for another day those things that matter so much and that should therefore receive our devotion today. We fall into the snare of assuming tomorrow will come soon enough, and there will be plenty of time to deal with those things. We know they are important, and they are the kind of things Jesus had in mind that day long ago when he told a story about a farmer whose crops were abundant but whose soul was barren.

Perhaps the most important verse in this passage is verse 15, in which Jesus said, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Just what should our life consist of then, that makes us rich, rich toward God? An awareness that life is a gift! A gratitude for all blessings! A deepened relationship to the one who is the source of those blessings! A devotion to those things that are truly most important to us! And finally a commitment to growth in faith and service to Christ.

Friends, the whole experience of being a pastor has caused me, many times, to become acutely aware of the uncertainties of life and the blessings of life. What a joy it has been to baptize babies, and adults, to officiate at the marriage of two people who really loved each other and knew what they were getting into, how refreshing it is to see people re-commit their lives to God and to their loved ones. That said,

more times, than I care to remember, I've received phone calls only to hear "Pastor Doug, can you come over, we have heard bad news."

My brothers and sisters in Christ. I think all of us know what it means to be "rich" toward God. In that spirit, let each of us make a quiet commitment of renewal – to see the hand of God in everything, to serve God with all we possess, and to live, and love and laugh. Let's do it together. AMEN.