

When it's time to audit your life

Text: Luke 12.13-21.

Most churches do an annual financial audit. It's expensive and time-consuming. A firm of CPAs go through the church's books with a fine-toothed comb, because parishioners have a right to know beyond a reasonable doubt that their church is using their financial gifts responsibly and honestly.

I feel sure that most of you know more about audits than I do. As you know, I'm more of a words guy than a numbers guy, but I've learned enough to know that I should compare the money coming in with the money going out, and if the former number is bigger than the latter, then things are probably OK.

Although I don't know much about financial audits, I do know a good bit about another kind of audit. I'm talking about a spiritual and moral audit of our lives. Some of you know about this, too. It's part of Twelve Step Programs. "We made a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves." The Twelve Step program uses the word "inventory," but really, it's the same thing as an audit.

The purpose of an audit is to determine if an organization is using its resources in an honest manner, in accord with the laws of the land, and in the cases of churches and non-profits, the purposes for which their resources were given to them.

You and I may not have lots of money that needs to be audited, but all of us have moral and spiritual resources. We have consciences. We know that some things are right and some things are wrong. We also have an awareness of God. We know that we have a higher purpose, that "it is God who made us and not we ourselves." We know that we have spirits or souls that will endure beyond our physical lives. We know that one day we will have to present the results of our moral and spiritual audit to our Maker.

Jesus told a story about a man who failed to do a "fearless and searching" moral audit, and God had to step in and do it for him, and the man came up short.

Jesus was speaking before a large crowd. At the beginning of chapter 12 of Luke's gospel, it says that the crowd was so large that they "trod upon each other." In other words, they were stepping all over each others' toes. Jesus had been telling the crowd that they were of infinite worth to God: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered." Suddenly, someone in the crowd shouted, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me."

I guess someone had not been paying attention! Now, I'm sure that none of you has been day-dreaming during my sermon. None of you are thinking about your tax returns

or worrying about making the mortgage payment. But someone listening to Jesus on that day was not fully present. Her mind was elsewhere.

Jesus replied, “Who made me a judge or divider over you?” Jesus was saying, “That’s not my job. I have a completely different task.” And then Jesus pointed out what was wrong with the man’s question: “Take heed! Beware of covetousness. Your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

I wonder why Jesus had to tell his listeners to “beware of covetousness.” It was an idea that was as old as the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not covet.” Covetousness is defined as “an unreasonable desire to possess what one does not possess.” Jesus seems to be saying that covetousness is to consider material or earthly things to be more valuable than spiritual or divine things.

However, money is only one of the things we can covet. I know plenty of clergy (including myself) who have coveted promotion in the church. In a sense, capitalism thrives on covetousness. Now, don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. I’m actually a big fan of capitalism. It has lifted millions, maybe billions, out of poverty. But there are weaknesses in the capitalist system. Capitalism is driven by advertising, and what is advertising about it not covetousness? Ads slyly and skillfully urge us to covet a new BMW, or a new pair of shoes by Gucci, or a vacation to Cancun, and so on.

So, Jesus told his listeners a story that perfectly illustrated the problem with covetousness: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

There’s an interesting mistranslation in that story. Both the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version say, “your soul is being demanded of you.” But the Greek text says, “These things have demanded your soul.” I think the difference is very important. The point is that the rich farmer no longer owned his crops and his barns and all the things his wealth had gotten for him; they owned him.

It’s a truth that all of us know. In a sense, we don’t own our houses, our cars, our retirement accounts; they own us. If we don’t keep our houses painted and our roofs in good repair, then they will lose value. So, we have to spend our time and money keeping our houses in good repair. The same is true of our cars. We have to take them into the shop when they need oil or new tires. And we certainly keep an eye on how our retirement accounts are doing.

There are a million claims on our time and money, and many, perhaps most, of those claims come from our material possessions. So, the question is: Who owns whom? Do we really own our houses, cars, and other possessions, or do they own us?

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a sermon on today's gospel text that he called, "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool." Dr. King pointed out that Jesus called this wealthy farmer a fool "because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived. He was a fool because he maximized the minimum and minimized the maximum. This man was a fool because he allowed his technology to outdistance his theology. This man was a fool because he allowed his mentality to outrun his morality."

According to Dr. King, "This man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others. Now, if you read this parable in the book of Luke, you will discover that this man utters about sixty words. And do you know in sixty words he said, 'I' and 'my' more than fifteen times? He failed to realize that he couldn't do anything by himself. This man talked like he could build the barns by himself, like he could till the soil by himself. And he failed to realize that wealth is always a result of the commonwealth."

As usual, Dr. King was very wise. His message is just as applicable today as it was in 1967. Maybe it's even more applicable now than it was then. I fear that we are living in a time when individualism is ascendant and concern for the community is waning, a time when "I" and "my" are crowding out "we" and "our."

You know, it's not just individuals who should do moral spiritual audits. Nations should do them, too.

We are being urged to put our national and individual wealth into safe and secure storage facilities and not share them with the needy world outside our borders. We are told to fear those who are "other" and "different," those who speak a different language, pray differently, look differently, and love differently.

Do you know what percentage of our federal budget goes to foreign aid? When most people are asked that question, they usually reply that at least 28 percent of our federal budget goes to foreign aid. However, the truth is that only about ONE PERCENT of our federal budget goes to foreign aid. By percentage of national income, the United States gives less than Portugal, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, or even Luxembourg.

Luxembourg? Really?

Jesus has something to say about that: "Thou fool!"

Every four years we go through a seemingly interminable presidential election. I get tired of the commercials and speeches and conventions and primaries, but this long drawn out process serves a purpose. Our presidential elections are also opportunities to do a kind of national moral and spiritual audit. Election season gives us an opportunity

to take our spiritual and moral temperature. And I'm afraid that our spiritual and moral health as a nation is not very good.

There's a spirit abroad in the United States that is cruel. The rhetoric employed by some of our candidates flirts with violence and racism. In his first inaugural, Abraham Lincoln appealed to the people of the United States to heed the "better angels of their nature," but I fear that some of our leaders are instead encouraging the violent and dangerous angels of our nature.

In 1967, Dr. King pointed out that the United States was behaving foolishly: "America today, my friends, is also rich in goods. We have our barns, and every day our rich nation is building new and larger and greater barns.... We spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food. But I want to say to America, 'I know where you can store that food free of charge: In the stomach of the millions of God's children in Asia and Africa and South America and in our own nation who go to bed hungry tonight.'"

Dr. King was right, and we should heed him. Jesus was right. What will become of our wealth when God taps us on the shoulder and says, "You and I have an appointment. I would like to review the books you've kept throughout your life. I want to see what you've done with all the resources I gave you, all the wealth I enabled you to create."

You and I do not possess a single thing that is not God's gift to us. In most Episcopal churches when the offering is brought forward, the priest raises it and says, "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee."

Is that true? Do we mean it when we say, "All things come of thee, O Lord"? If so, then let's take the opportunity to return some of the gifts God has given us, to open our barns and storehouses and bank accounts and put them to work for God.

Is now the time you should do a spiritual audit of your life? What will you say when God taps you on the shoulder and says, "It's time! The things you have stored up in your barns and bank accounts, to whom do they belong now?"

Amen.