

SERMON
“Being Rich Towards God”
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August 1, 2010
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Colossians 3: 1-11

So if you have been raised with Christ, **seek the things that are above**, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth**, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. There are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being rewarded in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Luke 12: 13-21 “Parable of the Rich Food”

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he 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**. Then he told them a parable. “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**.”

SERMON

Saint Paul says, “Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things of the earth.” Jesus says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Then he tells a parable about a rich fool. He tells about a man who in Jesus’ day would have been considered prudent. Heavens, in our day he would be considered wise in the way he handles his abundance. We’d call it planning ahead, developing a nest egg for our golden years, or putting a little aside for a rainy day. But Jesus tells us that God calls him a fool. “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

In the parable, the rich farmer has apparently acquired his goods through just means—nowhere is he accused of criminality or even greed. Yet, Jesus tells the parable to illustrate his statement, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; **for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**” Our greed will not bring us lasting happiness. This may indeed be a materialist world, Madonna, and finding pizza in the Yellow Pages may make us happy, even fill us for a while—but it will not bring us lasting happiness. The good life, the fulfilled life, does not come from the acquisition of more and more things. So from whence does it come? According to Jesus it comes from being “rich toward God”. Or as Paul puts it, “It comes from setting our minds on things that are above”, which is Paul’s way of saying, “Focus your mind on God, or the realm of God.”

Morton Kelsey, a former Episcopal priest, counselor, professor, writer and guru on spiritual development, was born to a mother and father with different views on “the nature of the world in which we live.” His mother was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, and her mother was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. His mother was steeped in the traditions of

religion. Her religion was very real to her. “However, she did not have the background to deal with the agnosticism of her husband.”

Morton Kelsey’s father was a brilliant man with a phenomenal memory. He graduated into the field of chemical engineering from Cornell University in 1905. “In reaction to naïve and literal biblical beliefs of his parents and armed with all the enthusiasm of the new scientism that was emerging in 1900, he “adopted the uncompromisingly materialistic view of his professors.”¹

Morton’s use of the word “materialistic” in his book *Reaching: The Journey to Fulfillment* explains the world view of those who believe that this physical world is all there is—no God, no spiritual reality, just what you can touch and see. Their only reality was that which was physically measurable. This was the world view of Morton’s father and the predominate structure in which he grew and developed, because his mother’s religious framework could not stand up to his father’s constant ridiculing. Up until the age of twenty-one, Morton’s views about life aligned with those of his father.

Then his mother died at the age of fifty-eight after a long and gruesome death. Her death, and his time at the rampantly agnostic Princeton University School of Philosophy put into motion an awaking to the hopelessness and the meaninglessness of materialist thinking. He states at this point in his life, “One of the problems of materialism is that it offers very little hope for people wrestling with the meaning of life or with the agony of sorrow and alienation. Life has little meaning if the best are snuffed out after a ghastly death, and that is the end.”

He realized if he were to survive, he would have to find something else. He felt if there was no meaning to human life, why go on. So off he went to seminary to see if the Christian church had anything to offer, although he thought the chances were slim. There he met Massy Shepherd, a magnificent lecturer on church history. Massy taught that the early Christians were

¹ Morton Kelsey, *Reaching: The Journey to Fulfillment*, p. 21.

on fire with something and that “something” seemed to be the continuing reality and presence of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. There someone also handed him a book by Baron Friedrich von Hugel, who gave Morton a new worldview—a view in which we humans share in both a physical and spiritual world. Little by little, a burning question was ignited in him. “How does one make contact with the spiritual world?” Or if he spoke using the language of Paul, “How does one make contact with the things that are above?” Or in Jesus’ language, “How does one become rich toward God.”

Morton “knew enough about philosophy and human beings and modern science to know that intellectual ideas not based on experience are seldom convincing to oneself or to anyone else. Seminary convinced him that there is a spiritual realm, as well as a material realm, to life. Yet, it did not instruct him on how he could come into communion and communication with the saving reality that had been the determining factor in the victory of the early church over persecution, death, and paganism.”

Morton Kelsey went off to his first parish with this matter still unresolved. He quickly climbed the ministry ladder of success because he was able to bring in the money, the people, preach interesting sermons, to minister to the sick and dying, and make a good impression. He was so good at doing what he did that he found himself being interviewed to be a rector (the Episcopal title for a minister with life tenure). He jumped into this “job” with everything he had. Soon the parish was growing and drawing people to services and church school. The parish finances blossomed. [I know, you’re wondering right about now, “Where can we find one like him?”]

Almost as soon as he achieved the status of “successful” clergyperson, the skies fell in. When ever he would get up to preach, there was a voice sitting on his left shoulder whispering,

“You don’t really believe in all this claptrap you’re preaching, do you?!?” It was very disconcerting.

At night he dreamed he entered the church to conduct the services, but could not find his vestments. Secondly, he could not find his sermon notes. His third temptation to despair, he could not find his place in the prayer book. Then he turned around to face the congregation to discover that a large tree had fallen through the nave of the church. He panicked, wondering how the ushers would be able to take up the collection. When he awoke in a cold sweat, he knew a war was raging within—a war between his beliefs and his father’s beliefs. He needed help.

So he went to a wise Quaker, Dorothy Phillips, who directed him to Max Zeller, a German Jew who had escaped from a Nazi concentration camp and was a Jungian analyst. Max lead Morton out of the quagmire in which he was sinking, and showed him that his dreams were wiser than his conscious self. He also explained how he could reach out to and communicate with the wisdom that was trying to reach him in his dreams.

Morton’s life began to mend. His sermons became more real. The voice on his shoulder ceased its jabbering. At long last, he had discovered a way to relate to the spiritual world. He had discovered how to set his mind on things that are above. There he discovered a Being of light and love who wanted his fellowship and wanted to guide and direct him. This guide had the same essential qualities of Jesus of Nazareth—wise, humble, down-to-earth, nonjudgmental, loving and courageous. He had discovered the path to true fulfillment.

Maybe greed infests our world because no one has ever taught us how to make contact with the spiritual world, how to set our minds on the things that are above, or how to become rich toward God. Maybe we keep buying and buying, acquiring an abundance of possessions

because we are frantically trying to fill a dark void in our lives, and we do not know that a fulfilled life comes only through a rich relationship with God.

Well, help is on the way! Across this land there is a growing interest in the development of a spiritual life; a life focused on things that are above. Right here at St. John's Chapel UCC you can join a Spiritual Development group and learn how to make contact with the spiritual world. You can learn how to look for where God is active in your life. You can learn how to be persistent and relentless in your praying by taking time to be available to God on a daily basis.

One thing I have found interesting is that each time I have lead a spiritual development group, I'm not alone in finding it difficult to give God just five minutes of my time on a daily basis—because we are so busy building bigger barns—so we can relax, eat, drink, and be merry. Nowhere in this parable does Jesus condemn building bigger barns or being merry. He points to the lack of balance in our storing up treasures for ourselves in comparison to our richness towards God. And the five minutes daily most of us have trouble giving, is far from being rich toward God. Could we possibly be in need of a support group to help us in the development of a rich relationship with God? Isn't it time to sign up for the next Spiritual Development group? And for those of us who have learned how to be rich toward God—to practice what we have learned.