

- *"Someone in the crowd* said to Jesus, *'Teacher, tell my brother* to divide the family inheritance with me.'" *Luke is so subtle here. Notice how an un-named younger brother, yet undifferentiated from the crowd, calls out to the "Teacher."* He has likely never met Jesus and does *not* summon him by name but by an abstract title! The complaining man *may* have a *real* grievance. Yet, look at his way of dealing with it. He wants this traveling teacher, who *appears to have authority*, to address *his particular problem*. He wants *'the Teacher'* to solve it, regardless of how the problem came about and, ... *regardless* of who has contributed to it. In effect, *his request is this: 'Give me justice!'* That's quite different from saying, *'Bring justice to the world!'* Or, *'Give us justice!'* *No*, his request is, *'Give me justice!'* But, *even though* this man wants justice, we should ask, *of what kind? For he doesn't want attention or accountability directed at himself.* That's why he is just *"someone in the crowd," un-named, undifferentiated* from others. He throws out his complaint *as if its merit is self-evident*, and he wants *a quick fix*. This tells us a lot about him. *And*, a lot about how he sees Jesus.
- *Of course, Luke wants us to notice how Jesus responds.* Using modern words, we see that *Jesus refuses to get 'triangulated.'*<sup>1</sup> But Jesus' response amounts to *more than* wise *'pastoral'* and *relational self-awareness*. Jesus also has a clear sense of his *vocation* and *mission*. *And*, on *this* basis, he responds to the man's plaintive request.
- *Now, both the un-named man's question, and Jesus' response to it, have much to do with the nature of authority. Some things* in our lives function as *surface* and *external* authorities. *Other things* serve as *internal* and *substantive* authorities. Think about the difference between *city laws* regulating parking, and the *'self-evident truths'* articulated in the Declaration of Independence. *Both are forms of authority.* Yet, parking regulations are comparatively thin, subject to change, and generally operate on us *from the outside*. By contrast, *the principles in the Declaration*, "that all men are

created equal... [and] endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...," these are *abiding* principles, which operate **within** our thinking and reasoning.

- *And so, when Jesus responds to that un-named man's request, he could possibly act like a local judge, administering outward legal regulations concerning inheritance.* Jesus' judgement would *then* be **particular** to the situation. *Instead, he responds with a higher and more enduring kind of authority. He responds with the authority of divine principles that apply to everyone, rather than with a judgement that applies only to a particular person and his particular concerns.* This is why we should be wary of our culture's tendency to equate civil laws with ethics, or to equate institutional policies with the moral principles that give rise to them.
- **Here is the paradox:** *this un-named man* in our Gospel, who appears to want to *remain anonymous, is perhaps a generic stand-in for all fallen human beings. For, he is us* ~ not some unnamed '*other!*' Nevertheless, but also as a sign of the same sin, *he wants a particular judgement tailored to his own personal circumstances.* Yet, Jesus, as he so often does when teaching, responds with **generic principles that apply to everyone, and to every circumstance.**
- This matches my own experience. *When, through prayer, I ask God to solve a particular problem I often find the Spirit leading me back to deep and abiding principles,* just as Jesus did with the unnamed man. By this, God prompts us to engage in **a searching process of discernment** - concerning *what our questions are really about, to better understand what what we are really asking for.* Inevitably, **the discernment that God encourages within us, leads us to self-awareness and greater self-perception.** A man asks Jesus to solve his financial problems by making his brother share the family inheritance. And Jesus says to him, *and to everyone else in the crowd,*

including the disciples, "*Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed...*" Those are words that apply to *all* of us, not just to the anonymous question-asker hiding in the crowd, who wants his particular problem solved. Characteristically, Jesus then tells a story to illustrate his point.

- James Tissot created an evocative and cautionary painting *illustrating Jesus' parable* in our Gospel. Concerning *the danger of greed, Tissot's painting focus' on the spiritual warning that Jesus provides*. The greedy man in the story is commonly referred to as *the rich fool*. As this troubled man sits among his many *large* sacks of grain and other valuables, he ponders how to hang on to his accumulating wealth. Having *more than he needs*, he considers replacing his present storage barns with larger ones. In the process, *his avarice takes hold of him, gravely endangering his soul*. Tissot captures the spiritual seriousness of the moment *by employing a metaphor* ~ a metaphor based on *the mortal threat* at the heart of the story. *Unseen behind the greedy man, the power of death* is represented by a great figure unleashing a sword.
- As the disciples and others began to perceive from their Master's sayings and stories, *Jesus' vocation as Messiah lifts him above a local role as merely a teacher and guide for a particular community*. For Jesus' teaching applies to *all communities at all times*, not just to *this or that* community set within a *single* cultural context.
- But, then, *how do we know if*, and in *what way*, Jesus' words apply to *us*? *That is our searching –if not also haunting– question*. And we should be careful *not to shortcut the question* by asking *some local 'authority'* to solve it for us – *such as*, for instance, our Bishop or another designated official. *Instead, we need to engage in continuing spiritual discernment, and in discernment both about ourselves, as individuals and as a community*. The best way we will know if we are storing up treasures for ourselves and not

being rich toward God, is *by praying about it*. And, we will move toward greater clarity *concerning the question* by *spiritually reasoning together* about it in community. *We want to be able to say what the Apostles said in Acts 15, that the answers we arrive at 'seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us.'* Spiritual discernment in community is enabled by *praying and worshipping together, regularly*. In other words, we come to this discernment by *continuing "in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers,"* as we say in the Baptismal Covenant.

- As individuals *and* as a parish church, God has given us many gifts. *May God bless us with spiritual discernment*, as we center our community on the authority of the Holy Spirit in our lives.



James Tissot, *The Man Who Hoards*

**Luke 12:13-21**

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "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."

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I have in mind here the understanding of human relations as found in 'Systems Theory,' and more particularly, as found in the teaching and writing of Edwin H. Friedman, and especially in his book, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*.