

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2016

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You all know that actions always begin with an idea or impulse and after the doing of it there is the result. The three parts of the things we do are *motive*, the *action* itself, and the *consequence*. If all three are good then what we do is good. But things can get complicated! If the attitude or motive behind the action is bad, even if the act itself is good and the result is good, there is trouble. A good intention and action can have a bad result, as any surgeon knows. And we all know the end does not justify the means. Motive, action, and result each stand at the bar of morality.

In the Sunday gospel a week ago we heard the course correction Our Lord Jesus gave Martha of Bethany. Her *motive* was initially good, to honor the Lord's visit with a fine meal. And no doubt she prepared a good meal. That was the *action*. And as a *result* of her serving it everyone was pleased. But Martha got into trouble when her initial motive was derailed by selfishness. Her sister Mary was not helping with the meal. So Martha built up a head of steam to the point of telling Almighty God what to do. "Make her help me in the kitchen." It is a *classic wrong prayer*.

All right. In today's gospel we have an incident that brings forth the Lord's parable on covetousness. It all begins with the incident in which a man, like Martha of Bethany, makes a wrong prayer. "Jesus, help me redistribute my father's inheritance." This was an absurd request. Jesus probably did not know either this man or his brother, the contents of the inheritance at stake, or why this man wanted more than he apparently received. But again a wrong request draws from the Lord memorable teaching, and in His parable Jesus gives an example of one kind of covetousness.

We know the Tenth Commandment. "**Thou shalt not covet.**" And it means we are not to desire what belongs to our neighbor. But the rich farmer in Christ's parable is not covetous in this sense at all. He didn't want anybody else's property. *He had too much of his own*. And he had a bad attitude about it. And this is where the rich farmer begins to sound like Martha of Bethany. Like Martha, he had many good qualities. Give credit where credit is due. The rich farmer had been a good steward of the gifts he had been given. A bumper crop is no accident! It is in no small way the result of good planning and good use of the farmer's resources. Even his

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decision to pull down his barns and erect larger ones shows creative advance planning, given the anticipated heavy crop to be harvested.

The man's tragic weakness is that in all of this he was self-centered, not God-centered. He equated the huge harvest with the selfish dream of being able to force increased amounts of food through the thirty feet we call the human digestive system! Here is a man made in the image and likeness of Almighty God, made to reflect that image and likeness in creation. His destiny is to be higher than the angels. His abundance of things on earth should lead to a fuller life and provide opportunity to extend charity. Yet all he thinks about is his own tummy! In a sense the rich farmer is the same kind of character as the prodigal son in another of the Lord's famous parables. The critical difference is that the prodigal son finally realized he was in a pigpen and got out of it, while the rich farmer died there.

God Incarnate comes to us confronting people with such limited vision and goals and expectations. Christ recalls us to our birthright: with the reminder of who we are, *Whose we are*, and where, please God we are going. Saint Paul realized how evil covetousness is, and twice in his writings identified it with *idolatry*. Paul linked the Tenth Commandment with the First. He saw covetousness as putting material things and self in the place of God. It traps us. The traps can include building barns with larger capacity, or insisting on help in the kitchen preparing a meal.

Remember it is not wrong to have precious earthly attachments. The problem never was with the bumper crop and what to do with it, or with honoring the Lord with hospitality. It becomes a tragic problem when our attitudes divide us from eternal life. The whole weight of the Scriptures is clear. When we do not accept the call of Christ it is our lot to never allow ourselves to be made truly free.