

Solutions, Not 'a' Solution

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Whenever we are presented with a problem, we are usually able to come up with a solution. Proposing a solution to a problem is a big step forward and much more preferable than simply complaining about a problem without offering a solution! However, the issue with proposing a solution is that it is just that, 'a' solution, one solution.

The rich man in today's parable came up with a solution to his problem: "what shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest...this is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones." While he did come up with an obvious and valid solution, notice that he only came up with one solution. As the parable ended, we are told that this one solution never came to fruition, for tragedy struck him that night and he died. He took none of his riches with him into the next life.

The parable in today's Gospel is certainly a parable about greed and wealth. The rich man wanted to rely on his wealth so that he could rest, eat, drink, and be merry for the next few years. But I would like to suggest that it is also a parable about failing to come up with more than one solution to a problem. The fact is that for any problem, there is more than just 'a' solution. With some creativity and the ability to move beyond self-interest, there are usually a dozen possible solutions to every problem.

Getting back to the parable, what could have been some other possible solutions to the rich man's problem of having a bountiful harvest, besides having to build a bigger barn? Here are some ideas: he could have donated his extra produce to charity. By doing this, he would have helped address the problem of hunger. Or, out of justice, he could have given some of his land away to the poor farmers in the area. In agricultural settings, remember that land is extremely valuable and there is often an unjust distribution of it. Or, he could have cut back his production by giving his family and employees more time off of work. Maybe he worked them too hard to produce that bountiful harvest. Or, he could have simply left some produce in the fields for others to come and 'steal' in honor of the Old Testament command in the book of Leviticus, which states, "when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien" (Lev. 23:22) Again, with a little creativity and lack of selfishness, there could have been other solutions to his problem.

To each problem we face, it is wise to propose many solutions before deciding how best to move forward. Do I only see one way forward when faced with a problem? Am I open to proposed solutions from other people?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that the Holy Spirit may help us propose as many solutions as possible to our problems. While we cannot pursue all of them and some will be better than others, may the experience of brainstorming together expand our horizons, give us new insights, and lead us in unexpected ways forward. Then, we will be rich in that which matters to God.