

The hearing room was a little more crowded than usual this particular Tuesday morning. About 35 well-dressed people had shown up for the reading of Helen Armitage's will. Most of them were family members – two sons, one daughter, seven grandchildren, and a brother – all potential heirs waiting to see what Helen had bequeathed to them. Five lawyers were present, as well as several members of the media. All this interest in a probate proceeding was not unusual when you understand that Helen's estate was valued at more than \$75 million.

Helen had been the matriarch of the Armitage family for more than fifty years. The Armitages were what is known as “old money”. The family had been wealthy for five generations, having originally made its mark in the banking business. Helen was the last of her generation, and public interest was high to see which of her children would be chosen to be the next family leader, a position that would be indicated by seeing who received the largest portion of the estate.

The buzz of conversation ended abruptly when the probate judge entered the room and took her place at the large oak desk at the front of the room. After the initial formalities were out of the way, the judge opened the will and proceeded to read it aloud.

Helen had always been one to do things her own way. Writing her will was no different. She had written it in her own hand, giving it the look and feel of a personal letter. She did not simply list how her estate was to be divided up, but she wrote a commentary of sorts, explaining why she gave what she did to each person or institution.

The list began with bequests to several colleges and universities. The art museum received a couple hundred thousand dollars, as did three children's charities. There was a bequest of five million dollars to the Episcopal Church, of which Helen had been a life-long member.

Finally came the part where the family members would be remembered. Though they would never admit it publicly, several of them were dismayed that Helen had left so much to the institutions. After all, that meant less for the family. But since all of them were millionaires in their own right, they could hardly make a fuss without being portrayed as greedy, which of course they were, as we all are, but one doesn't want to call attention to such things.

The judge continued reading the will. “My dear family, you have all been so good to me over the years. I am thankful for your love and friendship. I have noticed, however, that in recent months as my health declined, your interest in me picked up noticeably. Never have I received so many notes, flowers, and phone calls. While I appreciated your concern, I sense that much of it was misdirected. I don't mean to be cynical, but it is quite obvious that you all had an eye on my money.

“You were being good to me, and I appreciate that, but for you it was just a means to an end. For that reason (and also because you are all well off financially) I am leaving \$200,000 to each of the grandchildren, to pay for their college education, and to my children and brother I leave no money, but only the pictures and family heirlooms, items which to me are priceless because of the memories they hold.

“The remainder of my estate I leave to my personal attendant, Clara Johnson. Clara has never had much in life money-wise, but she has been faithful and hard working for the past 21 years. She has always been good to me, even though she had no reason to think that she would receive anything in my will. You might say that Clara was good for nothing. For that, I give her my thanks.”

Clara was not even present that morning to hear the will read. She had been out of work since Mrs. Armitage died two weeks earlier and had gone to visit her sister. The first she learned of her new wealth was when a camera crew from the local TV station tracked her down.

When asked what she had done to deserve such a huge reward, Clara thought for a moment and then said, “I don't know. I was only doing what I was supposed to. I never thought it was anything special.”

There is some similarity between Clara's situation and the situation of the righteous people in Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment. The most striking similarity is the fact that in both instances, the people who are rewarded have no idea that what they had been doing was especially commendable.

The people in the parable say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, and sick? We don't remember trying to do anything special to please you."

And that's one way to understand this parable. Jesus is telling us that he expects his followers to be good for nothing. We are to care for others not in order to add a few brownie points to some heavenly ledger, as if God is like Santa Claus, looking to see who's naughty and who's nice and reserving gifts only for those who are good.

We are most nearly living the way God wants us to live when being good and doing good become so second nature to us that we don't notice what we're doing.

The thing that sometimes bothers people about this parable is that it seems to advocate "works righteousness". By that I mean it seems to say that our standing before God is based solely on our works, the things we do and the way we treat others.

For anyone who has been part of a Lutheran congregation and has had Lutheran doctrine engrained in their brains, like me, this implication of works righteousness makes us squirm. We have learned that the good news of the gospel is that we are justified by faith, which means that God accepts us not on the basis of what we do, but on the basis of our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

In reading this parable, we must remember that Jesus is here speaking to the disciples, not to the crowds in general. He is speaking to people who are already within the community of faith, people who already have a relationship with him. This parable is not meant to describe what is necessary to be in a right relationship with God, but to set forth what is expected of those whom God has already justified – and what God expects of us is that we, like Clara, are to go about our tasks and be good for nothing.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus says something that is kind of like this parable:

*"Suppose one of you has a servant who comes in from plowing the field or tending the sheep. Would you take his coat, set the table, and say, 'Sit down and eat'? Wouldn't you be more likely to say, 'Prepare dinner; change your clothes and wait table for me until I've finished my coffee; then go to the kitchen and have your supper'? Does the servant get special thanks for doing what's expected of him? It's the same with you. When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, 'The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.'"* (Luke 17:7-10, *The Message*)

Oftentimes, we may not even receive a word of thanks for the good that we do. Today I would like to say a word of thanks to you – thanks for your stewardship of your time, talents, and financial resources. I get a little overwhelmed when I think back twenty-nine and a half years ago to the small group of people who gathered to worship at Greenwood School for the very first St. Barnabas worship service in November, 1985. From that inauspicious beginning, look at where St. Barnabas is today – a vibrant community of over 900 people who show their commitment to Christian ministry in this community by means of their generous offerings and the hours given in making the ministries of St. Barnabas a reality. Thank you for sharing the blessings God has given to you. Thank you for being the hands and feet of Christ in this community. I know that you act not out of anticipation of what you might receive, but out of gratefulness for what you already have received.

Unlike Clara, we need not wait for any probate court to find out what our bequest will be. It's already a matter of public record. Our bequest is what the King says to the righteous in the parable: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

In Matthew's gospel, after Jesus tells this parable, the next sentence is, "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." Next week, we gather to read the Passion of our Lord according to St. Matthew.