

Luke 12: 13-21 Rich Towards God

Last week, we listened to the parable in Luke's Gospel that calls us to pray with persistence, but not just any prayer, but the kind of prayer that aligns with God's prayer for us. We saw how that parable of a man who bothered his neighbor late at night asking for loaves of bread, *at first glance*, seemed to teach that if you just prayed hard enough, your prayer would be answered. But then we looked closer at the details of the story and noticed how the man wasn't asking for the bread to satisfy his own hunger, but to provide hospitality to another friend who had shown up at his door. Hospitality is one way of loving our neighbors, and when we love our neighbors, God's will is being done, here on earth.

So also, today's parable of a rich farmer who stored up his abundant crop could, *at first glance*, sound like a judgment on those who have plenty, or a judgment on wealth, period. But a closer look at the text will show that, to focus on the man's being rich, is to miss the point. What is the point, then? Let's step back and remember the context why Jesus is telling this parable.

In the Gospel of Luke, we have been following Jesus and his disciples on their journey toward Jerusalem, and we've noticed that Jesus uses parables whenever he's responding to questions from those who had gathered. The parable of the Good Samaritan was in response to a lawyer who asked how to gain eternal life. The parable of the man who went to his friend asking for some bread, was part of Jesus' answer to the disciples who had asked him to teach them how to pray.

So also, today's parable of a rich farmer is part of Jesus's response, to a man who asked Jesus to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. According to the inheritance laws, the elder brother was to receive double portions of the inheritance. Jesus sensed this man was anxious to secure the possession that was rightfully his. Jesus is also very much aware that anxiety and fear produce

greed and a grasping after things which we THINK will secure our future. It's not that the wealthy are automatically greedy, or the poor people, for that matter. Jesus was addressing the underlying anxiety and how it sets us off on a path which ironically robs us of abundant life.

So, instead of agreeing to be the judge to divide the inheritance, Jesus tells him and others the truth they needed to hear: pay attention, don't let greed take over your life, because life does not consist in abundance of possessions. THEN he tells the parable.

There is nothing in the story that says the farmer got rich by unjust means. Perhaps he did all the right things managing his farm, and his land produced abundantly; so much so that the existing barns that had sufficed up to now was no longer enough. His dilemma was he now has more than enough; more than can fit in his barns, because the existing barns held only "what was enough."

What we hear next is a very private soliloquy. It is the man's naked thoughts; his uninhibited thinking that reveals the inner working of his mind. The thoughts only he, and God, know. But he's not thinking of God, who had blessed him with the abundance. It doesn't occur to him to thank God or acknowledge God as the source of his blessing. So he consults himself.

"What should I do?" he asks, and the answer comes quickly and easily. "I will do this!" He will take down his barns and build himself bigger ones where he can store all his possessions, so his anxious soul can rest in security, and he can eat, drink, and be merry for all the years to come.

In tearing down his barns that held "enough," to build larger ones to hold all of his grain and goods, the farmer does away with the boundary that defined his needs and enters into the realm of hoarding, storing what is beyond enough. But his plan makes sense, no? He's just being prudent. After all, his ancestor Joseph, while serving the Egyptian king Pharaoh gave a similar advice, to store extra from

the years of abundance for the future scarcity and was commended for it. The critical difference here is that Joseph did this to save not just the King's family but the entire Egypt and its people, while it did not occur to this rich farmer that anyone other than himself might benefit from the abundance.

The farmer, who was blessed with abundant crop, with "more than enough," used it only to serve his own end, to secure his future, without thinking about anybody else. In doing so, he put himself in a silo, isolating himself from his neighbors and from God. He thought he could eat, drink and be merry in the company of 2, he and his soul.

Enters God, and God calls him a fool, because the farmer is completely misguided in thinking "the abundance of possessions" is where Life is at, cut off from all relationships and putting trust in his own devising. In God's eyes, such life is no life; if one were to live such life, one might as well be dead. In fact, that night was to be the last night of the farmer's life. Thinking only of his possession and how it might serve only him; his life imploded. He forgot hospitality. He forgot his neighbors. He forgot God. He forgot God who knows his needs and provides for them, far more securely than he could for himself. He also forgot that God is the author of life and death.

If we found ourselves with an abundance of wealth, what would our private conversation with ourselves be? Our drive for self-preservation is so strong, and for good reasons, if we don't pay attention, it will dictate our lives. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus says, because he has heard our inner soliloquy and he knows how easy it is for us to grasp for security in the tangible assets that we can see and count, whether we store them in the barns or deposit them in a bank account or see them reflected in the upward curb on the market performance chart.

The possessions we hold do not hold our future; God does. The wealth we accumulate does not love us back; God does. And we can, with our possessions, no matter how much or how little, love our neighbors and our God back. And when we do, all of our lives are enriched, and our possessions and our wealth are given life and meaning as the blessing God meant them to be. That's where Life is at.

Abundance of crop, abundance of wealth. What we decide to do with it, or not do with it, in the secret of our soul when no one is listening but God, can either isolate us in a silo and kill us, or make us co-workers with God in blessing others and be blessed by it ourselves. We do not become "rich toward God" by gaining points in doing good. Rather, we are "rich toward God" when we are richly available to collaborate with God in bringing the reign of God.

We are rich because, no matter how much or how little our earthly possession, in offering our lives, with all of who we are and all that we possess, we are teamed up with God, whose giving knows no ending. Life is not had by the possessions one has. Life and possessions are gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion.

There is a quote by Dag Hammarskjold which captivated me when I was still in college, and I've been unpacking its meaning ever since. Dag Hammarskjold was a public servant who served as the General Secretary of the United Nations in the 1950-60's and died in a plane crash while he was traveling in Congo to negotiate peace. He was a deep man of faith, and the quote is in his journal published in a volume called "the Markings." He called it his conversation with God. Here are his words: You will know Life and be acknowledged by it according to your degree of transparency, your capacity, that is, to vanish as an end, and remain purely as a means.

That's a life that is perfectly teamed up with God, emptying oneself of all other cares, with a razor-sharp focus on remaining in God's hand to do what God wills. That's what Dag Hammarskjold strove for, and I know of another life that actually lived it exemplarily. That life is described in Philippians 2.

Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Friends, let us remember, we, the church, are the body of this Christ.

Thanks be to God.