17 May 2020

Treasure: Moment of Decision

Luke 12:13-21

Our scripture today is a familiar passage, usually called "The Parable of the Rich Fool." It's found in Luke 12:13-21:

> 13 *Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'* 14 *But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'* 15 *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.'* 16 *Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly.* 17 *And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"* 18 *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.*
> 19 *And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."* 20 *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?"* 21 *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'*

I said that this was a familiar story, and to those who are long-time church members with many pastors and multiple stewardship seasons under their belts, that's probably true. My familiarity with this story, though, is not based on sermons, but on Arch Books. Anyone else here remember Arch Books – short illustrated children's versions of Bible Stories? Broad, sketchy pictures with lots of bright primary colors? I still picture the boy from the feeding of the 5000 as the little boy from the Arch Book "The Boy Who Gave His Lunch Away." And yes, we had the one called "The Rich Fool." In that book, the rich man was a smug prat mincing around under an umbrella while his workers slaved in the fields and built his new mega-barns. Boo! Sorry. I may not have worked through everything from my childhood.

But for those of you who know this parable but are less scarred by it than I, you've probably heard it interpreted in one of the following ways. First, as is normal for any passage that talks about money, this has been used during stewardship season to recommend increased giving to the church. "See? The rich man died and all his amassed money is of no value to him any more. Much better if he'd written large checks to the church. I mean, he'd still be dead, but *we'd* be better off!" Sometimes that message even takes a transactional approach. "Because this foolish rich man kept all of his money for himself, he died and went to hell. You don't want that to happen, do you?" Alternately, in certain circles of Christianity, there's a more socialist approach: condemning this bourgeois oppressor of the working class who could have redistributing his wealth to the poor, but because he didn't, he – again – died condemned to eternal punishment.

Now the transactional part of those interpretations, in which the rich man goes to hell because he didn't use his wealth to purchase God's favor, has no redeeming value, but other elements of those readings do have some validity. Jesus *does* make the point that all our wealth is of no value to us after we die. As for the socialist interpretation, it's overstated for this parable, but it is consistent with the rest of Luke's gospel. (A word of advice to my Christian brothers and sisters who are comfortable with the idea that God's favorite economic system is capitalism: you probably want to avoid reading the Gospel of Luke.) But none of these interpretations are really adequate. An important rule for interpreting scripture is that it is best not to base your interpretation on details that aren't actually in the text. So let's look at what *is* there.

First, *the land of a rich man produced abundantly.* I think this is actually an important line. Why was the man rich? Because he had a good year. It's not really anything he did to deserve it; there's no mention of how hard he worked, for instance. No, weather conditions were favorable, and this year he had a bumper crop, beyond all expectation. It's almost a random thing – it so happened that this year his land was good to him. So, having experienced this windfall, the man thought, "*What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"* This, I think, is the key verse: the moment of decision. When he experienced unexpected, undeserved bounty, he then had to ask, "Now what do I do?" Jesus doesn't lay out all the options that he could have considered, though. He just tells us what the man chose: Build more and bigger barns in which to keep my wealth secure, and then relax and spend it on myself.

Now the final scene, in which God speaks to the rich man and calls him a fool for that choice, because as it happens, tonight the rich man is to die. Here's where I want to draw attention not just to what is in the text but also to all the stuff people have added that isn't there. There is no mention of an afterlife at all – no threat of hell. And it's not as if Jesus was shy about talking about hell; he tosses fire and brimstone into parables all the time – in fact most of the images of hell in the New Testament come from parables, which is interesting all by itself. But this time, nothing. So don't drag hell into the interpretation. Nor is there the slightest hint that the man's death is a punishment for his selfishness or oppression of the working class or anything. No, his death comes across in the text as an event just as random as the man's wealth. Sometimes crops do really well; this year they did. Sometimes people die; this time it was him. So, remembering all that, why does God call him a fool? Not, evidently, because of consequences for his actions but simply because by thinking only of himself, he screwed up the time he had. "You had this windfall of wealth, and you spent it on building barns for nobody. You're a moron!"

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Looked at in this light, we see that this parable isn't really concerned with money, except as a useful example of a much more important theme, the one we've been exploring all month: How do live our lives so as to grow into the image of God that we were created to be? A couple of weeks ago, we talked about our approach to time. Last week we explored talents and gifts. In both cases, what we talked about was the choice of whether we will reserve our time and talents for our own benefit or dedicate them to the service of God, usually by serving others. Today we pick up a third approach to this essential question: What about material possessions?

Going back to the points we drew from Jesus' parable, we note that Jesus is right: wealth is random. Yes, I know that we Americans like to believe that we live in a meritocracy, in which anyone can succeed financially through hard work. It's the whole Horatio Alger Rags-to-Riches myth. It's not that simple. I don't mean to belittle the value of hard work, but you don't have to think very hard to realize that it's not the whole story. It wasn't our hard work that led to us being born in one of the wealthiest nations in human history, with one of the most luxurious lifestyles. And we're American, which gives us a better chance than if we had been born in many other nations. Those of us born white or male had fewer obstacles to overcome, and those us who grew up during a time of affordable college education lucked out there, too. None of these things have anything to do with our own hard work and gumption. And it gets even more random than that. Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* sets out to examine why some succeed and others, with apparently equal advantages, don't. He found all sorts of random factors involved in different types of success. For instance, you're more likely to succeed in Canadian Hockey if you're born in January. (It has to do with the cutoff ages for youth hockey leagues.) The fact is – even agreeing that people who work hard are more likely to do well than those who don't – to a very large extent, our bounty is as random as the rich man's in the parable.

So, given that fact, the rich man's question is ours: "Wow, I have more than I need for my own safety and security. What should I do with my surplus?" And we do have the same option that the rich man chose: we can build bigger barns. We can diversify our portfolios, invest in real estate, begin a revocable trust, and so on. We can save or invest every penny of our surplus for ourselves. And saving is good and wise and responsible. But that can't be all we do with our bounty. That is not a choice that will draw us closer to the mind of God. Our material gifts, like our talents and abilities, become sacred when they are used for the sake of others. And the time to make that choice is now. I once heard a financial advisor on the radio telling people to make sure they had made themselves financially secure before giving to charity. Yeah, don't do that. You see, we have an incredibly flexible definition of how much is enough. When people are asked in surveys "How much would you consider to be 'enough'?" their answer invariably boils down to "a little bit more than I make now." If we wait to give to others until we are satisfied, we will never give anything at all, and what a foolish waste of a life that would be.

There's a different mindset, though, and our current crisis has provided a beautiful example of it. As most of you know, a part of the Covid-19 stimulus bill provided a relief check to every adult American, $1200 each. Now perhaps this is the most equitable way to provide relief quickly, for Congress to give money to *every* voter, but one of the curious effects of this is that some of those checks went to people who desperately needed that relief, and others went to people who got it and said, "What am I going to do with this?" And I have had some lovely conversations and email exchanges with people contacting me to ask, "Where is the need?" Some have given money through the church, supporting our radio ministry (bringing worship into people's homes feels important these days) or our Helping Hands emergency fund that we have for people in financial crisis. With others I've talked about the good work that Community Table and Feed My People have been doing while the rest of us retreated to our homes. These people have, through their actions, preached to me. In them, I have caught glimpses of the image of God.

And just to wrap up the parable, remember that using our material gifts to serve God by serving others is not a transaction. You don't earn any points toward heaven. This isn't about adding to some eternal reward; that's just a different kind of greed. No, as with the Rich Fool, this is about the choices that we make that enable us to live lives today that step by step are more like Christ. That's all. And that's enough.

Let us pray:

God, it isn't always easy to know how to be thankful.
We're grateful for and proud of our nation, with all its struggles,
  but being born American wasn't some special favor you granted us for some reason,
  any more than you were punishing those who are born in war zones and refugee camps.
We're grateful for our food,

but even as we say that, we remember how many millions around the world are hungry today.

We're grateful for our families and friends,

but in that warm feeling of thanks, we remember the friends and family members who are grieving the 300,000 who have died around the world in this pandemic.

So thank you for both sides of the coin.

Thank you for all the undeserved gifts that we have and for the capacity to enjoy them.

Thank you for hearts that can learn to love and find fulfilment in others.

And thank you for the experiences that have taught us what it is like to be cold or hungry or alone,

and thank you for the compassion by which you stir us to warm and feed and befriend others.

You made us like you, able to know both your joy and your ache,

and for that we give you thanks today. Amen.