

Sermon: "Don't Fill Your Barns"

Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

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

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD.

"You Fool!" This is strong language – usually reserved for hurling as an insult against your enemies or adversaries with whom all hope of reasoned discourse has broken down. These words of Jesus as told by Luke sound even more dismissive. Suggesting no alternative to the rich man's business strategy. "Your soul has been bankrupted by your balance sheet; foreclosure is imminent. "Your Dead".

The centerpiece of this passage is the parable of the rich fool, a person who is more concerned with storing excess riches than with striving for God's realm. The parable paints a vivid image of the dangers of wealth for its own sake. Those who have possessions in abundance risk the sin of greed: "enough" is never enough, "more" is only to be hoarded, and "I, me, and mine" matter more than anybody else. Greed is a problem primarily because its focus on the self keeps people from being "Rich toward God" and rich towards others.

The human propensity toward greed stands in striking contrast to God's providential care for rich and poor alike, as well as to Luke's theme of appropriate stewardship of one's possessions.

His barns already bursting to overflowing, a rich man harvest a bumper crop with no place to store it. Desiring to keep this bounty for himself, and not being one to concern himself with the problems of waste, he plans to tear down the old barns, construct larger ones, store up his crops, and then sit back and enjoy the excess. This farmer stands as a negative example for the followers of Jesus: if you want to know how **not** to live as a disciple, just be like this person.

Those who read and hear the parable might ask, what is so wrong with storing the overrun of crops? Frugal-minded folk have long stashed excess food and supplies in silos, pantries, and basement shelves: they have saved for rainy days, squirreled away funds for retirement, and even secreted a few dollar bills under the mattresses. Is not this a prudent hedge against future economic uncertainty?

After all, this is precisely what the young Joseph advises pharaoh after interpreting a dream, to mean seven years of plenty and seven years of famine (Gen 41:17-36): store up the excess in the fat years so there will be enough for everybody in the lean years. Further, does not this man deserve to "eat, drink, and be merry" in celebration of his extreme good fortune? Any number of feast and parties throughout the Bible give ample evidence for the practice of celebrating the harvest or rejoicing at signs of good fortune.

To be sure, saving for future material needs is one component of proper stewardship of God's bounty. Appropriate concern for the future is balanced, however, with the injunction to give glory to God and to care for one's neighbor, to provide for the poor and the marginalized, for those without access to the world's wealth or even the basic needs of survival. We should note that the man in the parable demonstrates neither of these twin aspects of stewardship – return to God and care for neighbor – mainly because he has become so focused on himself that he has forgotten both the God who caused the earth's bounty and the neighbor without access to that bounty.

We might note, as well, how the pronouns “I, me and my” dominate the story. Here there is concern only for himself, not for his neighbors, for those who have no land to produce their own crops, for the alien, the widow, and the orphan at the margins of society, for any whose lives are at risk due to their limited access to resources. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, as well as in the development of the church over the centuries, the act of giving to the poor remains a central element of the sanctified life. The man in the parable is so self-centered, however, that he cannot see beyond what he considers to be “his” harvest, “his” barns, and “his own” life.

At least two additional issues are at stake. First is the reminder that God is the author of life and death, as well as the creator of a land that produces food for its inhabitants. In theological terms, it is divine providence that has made possible the excess crops. The parable’s protagonist, however, ignores the hand of God in his good fortune and focuses only on the benefit accruing to himself. Nowhere does he offer thanksgiving to God for the abundance of his land.

Second the man seems to have forgotten that all created life is bounded by death, a reality that comes to bear whatever the quantity of one’s possessions. In the end, and sooner rather than later, death will separate him from his overflowing barns. “You cannot take it with you”, so the popular saying goes; or alternatively, we might say, “There is no storage facilities in heaven”. Despite barns filled to the brim, the man’s days are numbered, a fact he seems to forget as he congratulates himself for his fine lot in life.

With all this excess at the center of his life, the man plunges into the trap of idolatry, an idolatry that often idolized by our culture. The nearly constant message of today’s media is that life does, indeed, consist in the abundance of possessions. We are encouraged to spend more, have more, and use more; to supersize and maximize; to bank on the appearance of wealth as a sign of the good life. Insofar as the culture cultivates a propensity to buy things we do not need; it champions a way of life that this parable characterizes as folly.

The parable might sound a different note in a different context. If one lives in utter poverty, without access even to the basic necessities of life, the promise of wealth is not cast aside lightly. However, the parable calls on all, rich and poor alike, to reflect carefully about what we want and why we want it. Are our desires and standards for what is enough driven by a determination to store up treasures for our own pleasure, or by our understanding of God’s blessings and our true purpose in life? Will we measure our lives by the standards of the media, seducing us to want more, or by the call of the gospel to be rich toward God? That brings us back to what Luke invites today’s congregation to wrestle with: what does it mean to be “rich towards God?” This is a question of discernment well worth asking.

PRAYER:

God of judgement and renewal, we admit to you and to each other that we have not always loved you or our neighbors as fully as you call us to love. We have failed to be good stewards of the blessings you have given us. We have turned away from you and toward our own self-interest. Help us to turn back to you that we may better love you and faithfully serve you; in Jesus’ name we pray.

BENEDICTION:

Distractions block off clear discernment and lead to choices and commitments that are often tragically foolish. No one sets out to make stupid decisions! When information relevant to decision making is merely overlooked, this is relatively easy to correct, we can look again and adjust (Now I see!). If we have a predisposition to distraction, however, (Either too many things or one big thing), it is hard to put things into perspective. The parables shock therapy of sharp warning is an intervention of last resort.