

July 31, 2016
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 13, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107: 1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

Jesus typically offers parables in response to some societal problem—some human behavior that Jesus deems inappropriate in his redefining of the way life should be—life in God's kingdom, not to be confused with life as it is in the human realm. Today's parable is part of Jesus' response to the man in the crowd who insists that Jesus advocate on his behalf, that he might receive a share of his brother's family inheritance. There is Hebrew law in Deuteronomy stipulating that the oldest son would inherit a double-share of the family estate. Clearly the man in the crowd is not his parents' first-born. He wants something to which, legally at least, he is not entitled—marking the man as both greedy and coveting that which belongs to his brother. So, Jesus tells the crowd a story, a parable, in response. The thing is, parables are tricky: Jesus challenges popular assumptions. So, let's take the bait.

The land owner in today's parable: might he not be seen as a person who is successful-- someone who works, plans, saves, seeks to protect and preserve his belongings for a secure future, and even deserves to enjoy the fruits of his labors? For those of us who were raised with the notion that self-sufficiency is a good thing, and those of us who have been taught to save for a rainy day, who as good boy and Girl Scouts learned to *prepare* for come-what-may, we might ask, "What's the problem here?" We could even argue that people who give no thought to their future security might be considered reckless, lazy, or wasteful—people who have not provided for themselves and may even become (at some point in their lives) a burden to others. So, where is the fine line between prudence and acquisitiveness (or greed)?

The author Charles Dickens adapted Luke's Gospel into a story for his children that he called, *The Life of Our Lord*. So, we know Dickens was well acquainted with the Gospel of Luke. We might see some similarities between the rich land owner in today's Lukan parable and Dickens' famous character from *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge, of course, was a successful, miserly rich man who worshipped his money and exploited others until his dreams led by the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future—dreams of what might have been and what the future might bring, (including Scrooge's own death) transformed his greed into generosity. Perhaps the critical difference between Ebenezer Scrooge and the parable's rich land owner is that Dickens provides Scrooge the opportunity for repentance and redemption in his lifetime. For the parable's land owner, it's too late.

The rich land owner is anticipating a bumper crop—a harvest so large he will not be able to store it all. And, that is exactly what he plans to do—to store it all for himself. If the land owner's *plan* isn't enough to expose his greed and self-centeredness, the language of his inner thoughts is very telling. In just three verses, the man says "I" six times and "my" five times: my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods...my soul. Until God enters the story, there are no other characters—just the man and his possessions. The land owner seems to live in his own illusionary self-sufficient world, without even a thought about anyone else.

For Jesus, that's a big problem—Jesus who simplifies the commandments down to love of God, and love of neighbor as oneself. The land owner doesn't acknowledge the existence of God or anyone *but* himself, even taking personal credit for all he has. He learns the hard way that all of it is on loan from God, and the loan is coming due before morning, when his very soul will be returned to God. God asks a rhetorical question—it doesn't really matter who will become the owner of the man's earthly possessions when he dies. The sure thing is death will separate the man from all the earthly things he holds dear. What will be left to show for the man's life other than material possessions?

Luke's Gospel frequently addresses the injustice of the gulf that separates the rich from the poor. There are two issues: do the rich come by their wealth at the expense of the poor (as in, tax collectors raking off unfair commissions for themselves)? And then, what do the rich *do* with their resources? It's not the land owner's possessions that pose the problem in the parable. The problem is the land owner's self-indulgent relationship with his possessions—the prizing and hoarding of them in contrast to his utter spiritual poverty—his complete absence of gratitude. There is no notion of God in the land owner's soul, and not even a thought of generosity (as in sharing his abundance).

The land owner in today's parable is not actually called "greedy," or "sinful." God address him as, "You fool!" In the words of Psalm 14, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" (14:1) The rich fool in Luke shows folly on several levels: He is preoccupied with material possessions, he places his security in his self-sufficiency, he has greed in his heart rather than any compassion for others, his goal in life is his own pleasure, and he lives as though there is no God. The man's impending death exposes him as a fool, for not only will he not enjoy his possessions "for many years" as he plans, he will leave no meaningful legacy—only a harvest still in the fields and barns full of crops that will soon belong to someone else. Eugene Peterson, contemporary-language Bible translator says, "That's what happens when you fill you barn with Self and not with God."¹

The Parable of the Rich Fool invites us to consider our relationship with our material possessions. What things do we accumulate for the perceived sense of security they give us? When there is a big sale at the grocery store, I wonder how many of us buy ten cans of solid white albacore tuna for \$10, and do we take half of them to the food pantry, or do we store them all? What about that closet at home that contains several pairs of shoes that haven't seen the light of day as far back as we can remember? And then, there's that box of clothes in the attic—you know the one—the box of clothes that is going to come in really handy on that magical morning when we awaken 25 pounds lighter than we were the day before. These are all *my own* confessions, by the way. You probably have your own versions.

Years ago I had a friend in Maine, a gentleman in his early eighties who was quite an accomplished cook. His name was Les, and he lived in a modest cabin on the edge of the woods. Even though his name was "Les" the walls of his small kitchen were covered in pegboard obscured by hanging pots, pans, and *more* kinds of cooking utensils than you'd find at William Sonoma. At Les' funeral, a mutual friend named Ken told the story of Les telephoning him one day, all excited. "Ken," Les said, "You have to come right over to see what I just found at the flea market!" Les was waiting for Ken at the door, holding some strange metal contraption with a wooden handle. "What is it?" Ken asked. "Well, I think it's a kitchen gadget," Les replied." "What does it do?" Ken asked. "I don't know yet," Les answered. "Why did you buy it?" Ken asked. And Les replied, "Because, I didn't have one."

The answer to the question, "How much is enough?" is probably different for each of us. Maybe better questions to ask ourselves are, "What is my relationship with the things I own? Do they make my life more beautiful, more comfortable, or do I really find some sense of security or illusion of self-sufficiency in my possessions?" The parable reminds us we do not live entirely unto ourselves—self-sufficiency is a myth. And, no matter what we own, our earthly lives are finite. The truth is nothing we store in our barns can stave off a fatal diagnosis. No amount of material possessions can save any of us from bombs or bullets. At this moment in time, few if any of us know how and when our hearts will stop beating. When that day comes, what legacy will we leave, beyond whatever material stuff is stored in our barns? What can we do with our possessions in this lifetime to glorify God and to demonstrate love of neighbor?

Materialism ranges from a practical concern for being prepared for come-what-may to senseless hoarding, now labeled as a mental health diagnosis. Hoarding Disorder has become entertainment—the subject of television documentaries and reality shows. Greed involves misplacing

our sense of security and well-being in visible, tangible, even edible earthly things rather than placing our reliance and faith in God as the ultimate source of all things.

Remember the “Manna in the Wilderness” story from Exodus? Moses led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt into the desert. They were hungry. God heard their cries and sent the mysterious bread that rained down from heaven every morning, and (except for the day before the Sabbath) the people were able to gather only enough manna for one day at a time because any leftovers would spoil. There would be no saving up extra manna—no hoarding—so the people would have to rely on God every day to care for them.

Today’s parable lesson doesn’t end with verse 21. As they make their way toward Jerusalem, Jesus continues teaching the disciples not to strive for or worry about material things, ending the lesson with those well-known words, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (12:34)

The other day, a friend sent me what she said is an old folk blessing. I actually found many different versions of it online, attributed to multiple individuals. My friend’s version goes like this:

“I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.
I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.
I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive.
I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear much bigger.
I wish you a life filled with enough good things to sustain you.”

Finally, last Sunday’s Collect is a fitting end to the Parable of the Rich Fool: “O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”ⁱⁱ

NOTES:

ⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament Psalms and Proverbs* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, [1995]), 154.

ⁱⁱ BCP, Proper 12, p. 231.