

Sermon: C Proper 13 2016
St. Augustines-in-the-Woods
31 July 2016
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Luke 12:13-21
Eccles. 1 / 2
Colossians 3:1-11
Psalm 49:1-11

The combined dangers of wealth, possessions, and greed are a constant theme in the teachings of Jesus. Today's gospel drives it all home.

Pondering this text in Luke, a friend of mine went home and discovered that she owned 40 pairs of shoes! As shocking as that was, she realized that she coveted another pair she had seen in a catalog...on sale, too! Surely she's no Imelda Marcos, but she did admit she was thinking about reconfiguring her closet. I share this as one who bought the Japanese Art of Tidying Up, purged my closet of a carload of clothes accumulated since Hurricane Katrina, and have rolled my t-shirts and socks carefully (they are happy now). I bought the book on Amazon Prime, of course, a constant temptation, so my bookshelves are filling up at an alarming rate. How many books are too many, I wonder?

The story of the Rich Fool is Jesus' answer to a possibly greedy young man's question about his inheritance. We know the story well enough to know it often delights children yet frightens us grown-ups who know how rich we are by the world's standards. Are we also fools? More like that rich farmer that we like to admit?

The farmer had such abundant harvests that he talked himself into tearing down his silos to build bigger ones to hold all his grain. He liked having it around; it was his, after all. Having it gave him a sense of security. If his neighbors didn't have enough to eat that was their problem. Now that it was all stored he could relax and have fun! But instead, he died--his barns full, his heart empty, his life over and done with.

The mistakes of the rich fool were many. To begin with, he believed that all his accumulated grain was his. He grew it and he saved it. But, in fact, the richness of God's creation--the good soil, abundant rain and sunshine--made his largesse possible. He wasn't grateful; God wasn't on his screen. A self-made man, his success was only all about him. So was his insecurity. This man was a hoarder so terribly afraid of dying that he grasped the delusion that having more would keep him alive; an ever increasing mountain of grain convinced him that he was powerful and invincible. "I am what I have" he thought proudly.

Secondly, he had no regard for anyone but himself--not God, not anyone. He didn't even talk to anyone else. He has a conversation with his own Soul in this passage! We call that "self-referential" today. Not only does it mean he didn't share with anyone else, he didn't care about anyone else; all his values were bound up in his own success. He operated out of a philosophy of calculated self-interest. His rampant individualism fueled not only his desire for more, but also his greed. The less others have, the more powerful he felt. He thought he was entitled; after all, he worked hard; probably the poor people didn't, he imagined. He may have paid lip-service to something called the "common good" but he didn't really believe in it. Every man for himself was his creed.

Sadly, we know today that the rich fool's attitude is alive and well. Jesus no doubt knew that the dangers of accumulated wealth and the pretension to power it brings about would never go away. Human beings have the same corruptible souls now as then. Something needs to wake us up to all this, which is why Jesus told this story, called the man a fool, and ended it with his untimely death. We need to pay close attention to the greed that surrounds us and drives our economy and so much of our common life today. We live in perilous times and we've got to do something about it.

I grew up in a modest household in suburban Washington D.C.. My dad was a civilian attorney for the Air Force for much of his career and my mom, a parish secretary. We lived in a small house and I went to public school. At the age of 55 my father retired from Government service on disability. He was going blind slowly, worried that he would become less effective. About 20 years into his retirement, Dad took me aside to show me their bank accounts and what I would inherit someday. I was astonished at the amount of accumulated wealth and what was coming in each month in his pension check--which was over twice what he had made on his last day of work. He told me it was because every time Congress voted a raise in pay, he got a raise in his pension. And then he said something I will never, ever forget. "It's not a good thing, Susan. Because I am getting so much more, someone out there isn't getting enough to live on. It's not a fair situation and it is getting worse every day." That was in 1985. Dad died in 2010 at age 100. You can do the math.

My Dad grew up poor and died wealthier, though not rich by today's standards. He shared what he had generously--both his skills in lot of pro bono work and his money. He brought people joy through music all of his life. With a full heart he viewed life as a gift from God and died happy. I think that is key to

what Jesus meant when he said of the rich fool that he was not “rich toward God” as my Dad surely was.

Discipleship is more than a set of behaviors; it is a disposition of the heart. If we are serious followers of Jesus we must not only take a hard look at how easily wealth and possessions can possess us, but also how dangerous to the common good are the individualistic cultural habits of today that destroy people’s souls and devastate the poor. There are no self-made people; all are dependent on others and on God.

Living “rich toward God” means standing firm for God’s desire for the common good over selfish motives to get richer at the expense of others. We are not self-referential; we answer to God. The self-serving values of many in our culture today render us as a society fragile as a people as the rich get richer and the poor, poorer. We need to do all we can to move our cold, calculating culture back to the ways of God, the ways of a full and generous and heart. Those who live “rich toward God” understand that life is a gift, not to be squandered, but cherished.

Give generously of your stuff and of yourself--of what you have and who you are. God and the people of this community need you. Live richly toward God. Don’t be a fool!