

### It's Not About the Money

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us another short, seemingly simple parable that proves to be loaded with meaning the minute you scratch the surface. A little context beyond our lectionary is in order. While a crowd of thousands gathered to hear him speak, Jesus has been in private conversation with his disciples. He has just told them to be careful around the Pharisees, but not to worry about earthly dangers so long as they're right with God. Going out to address the crowd, he gets hit with a request from someone in the audience: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." After politely declining to arbitrate this sibling dispute, Jesus replies, "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 tells the Parable of the Rich Fool.

This parable appears only in the Gospel of Luke, and it doesn't get as much attention as it deserves. Commentators often presume that Jesus's warning about greed is addressed to the person who asks to share in the family estate, and that the parable simply instructs us not to pile up money for our heirs to fight over after we're gone. Respectfully, that's an oversimplification. The landowner in this parable has been blessed with a harvest so abundant that it literally won't all fit into his barns. Note the plural here. In a society where most people were barely scraping by and having a small herd of sheep made someone relatively wealthy, this landowner with multiple barns must be exceptionally well off. A harvest his barns couldn't hold would be such an extravagant blessing that it could only come from God. When Jesus presents this kind of abundance, whether in hauls of fish that strain nets to bursting or harvests that overflow a farmer's barns, we know we're in Kingdom territory.

Unfortunately, the lucky landowner doesn't seem to get the message. Instead of falling on his knees in gratitude to God or offering his excess riches to benefit the poor, the landowner

decides to keep it all. He isn't even sensible about it. Rather than building additional barns to house his excess harvest, he decides to tear down the perfectly serviceable barns he already has and build bigger ones, all with the goal of being able to tell his soul to relax, eat, drink, and be merry, having ample goods in hand. He won't be able to enjoy his bounty, however, because God tells him that his life will end that very night. The Lord asks who will inherit the landowner's riches; that the answer isn't clear makes me think that the landowner has been so busy piling up riches that there's no one in his life whom he loves enough to make his heir. Despite his vast wealth, this man isn't rich, either toward his family, his community or God. Suddenly, our common understanding of what it means to be wealthy seems very much in need of recalibration.

It's important to remember that God doesn't call the landowner a fool because he has money. He was wealthy even before the Lord blessed him with that massive harvest. The landowner is a fool because he decides to hoard God-given wealth for personal enjoyment and withdraw from the world. Similarly, Jesus doesn't tell the crowd to beware of money. He tells them to "be on [their] guard against all kinds of greed," a sentiment echoed in Colossians' characterization of greed as idolatry. Money itself isn't the problem. It's just a resource that has a lot in common with water. A minimum of both is essential to survival. Both are nice to have in reasonable quantities, and both are problematic in excess. Floods and tsunamis can wound or even kill; so can money when people anxiously hoard it, use it to punish displeasing spouses or disobedient children, or withhold it from those who can't survive without financial help. When money becomes a means to power, a tool for manipulation, or a buffer that insulates its owners from the sufferings of others, it draws us away from the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus tells his listeners that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions," he isn't referring to the span of years we spend on earth. The Greek word Jesus

uses for life, ζωή (*zōé*), means, as Thayer's Greek Lexicon quotes Cicero, "a life active and vigorous, devoted to God, blessed, the portion even in this world of those who put their trust in Christ, but after the resurrection ... to last forever." Jesus is warning his followers that greed can deprive them of access to that active, vigorous, blessed life, the life filled with love, joy, and devotion that God has always intended for us. Jesus offers us life in the Kingdom, and no amount of money can purchase anything that even comes close. Even the most luxurious relaxing, eating, drinking, and making merry get old after a while, especially when you have to enjoy them alone.

Jesus didn't intervene between the siblings in this passage, just as he didn't when Mary and Martha argued a couple of weeks ago. Loving us all, perhaps Jesus prefers that we work out family squabbles on our own. But we shouldn't presume, as some commentators do, that the sibling who asked to share in the family estate was greedy. Temple law was clear about who got what when parents passed away. Assuming that the brother was the eldest, he inherited a double portion of the estate. If there were several children or the family wasn't well-off, there might not have been much left for the others. If the eldest brother had achieved independent financial success he might not have needed the inheritance, or perhaps the sibling who asked Jesus to intervene had fallen on hard times and was desperate for money. When Jesus warned the crowd against greed, he might have hoped that the older brother was listening, allowing him to insert instruction into the family dispute without taking sides. Certainly, he would have wanted both siblings to enjoy the abundant blessings of Kingdom life, just as he wants those of us who follow him now to share the Kingdom's blessings with our fellow children of God.

If Jesus is right that our lives don't consist in having an abundance of possessions, we need to rethink our definition of success. Again, there's nothing inherently evil about wealth. It's not about the money; it's about what we do to get it, how we use it, and how having it affects us.

Our economy is driven by consumerism, so we're constantly bombarded with the message that we're only valuable if we can buy the most expensive things the market can offer. At the same time, we hear incessantly that the markets are in turmoil, layoffs and budget cuts are escalating, landfills are bursting, and trade wars are about to send prices into orbit. We can lose hope when pleas for charitable donations grow too desperate. We can forget, as the Rich Fool apparently did, that what we have at any given moment is not all we'll ever receive. The temptation to hunker down, isolate ourselves, and hoard whatever assets we have like a dragon hoards its gold can be overwhelming. But we follow Jesus, and that's not what he calls us to do.

As Christians, our call is to be rich toward God. That can mean a lot of things. It doesn't mean that we can't put aside an emergency fund, save for retirement, or splurge on the occasional special purchase. It does mean that we shouldn't foolishly squander God's gifts or prioritize wealth until we forget to enjoy and be grateful for what we have, to give, and especially to pray. Our very lives are a gift from God; so is everything we own and everyone we know. God tells us how to use what he gives us when we ask for guidance, listen, discern, and make our relationship with him our highest priority. Our desires evolve so that money and "stuff" become less appealing than spending time with the people we love and pleasing the God we serve. We're inclined to buy fewer things, and to share what we have while we're on this earth instead of making people wait until we're gone for funds that could benefit them sooner. When God grants us an especially abundant harvest, we're more likely to give it away than to squirrel it away. If we listen to Jesus and guard against all kinds of greed, we learn to let God's bounty flow through our hands, watering the world around us as we create faithful, generous lives that our loved ones will gratefully remember when we're gone. Being rich toward God lets us help bring his Kingdom closer. That's the best inheritance we could ever leave behind. Amen.