

Serve Love, Not Wealth: Luke's Parable of the Rich Fool

This morning's Gospel opens with a family fight over money. Jesus has embarked on his long, final journey to Jerusalem, teaching and taking questions from the crowd. Someone shouts out a request: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Depending on the speaker's tone, that bald request might have inspired laughter from the crowd, or those few words might have held a world of hurt. Luke doesn't tell us anything more about the speaker or the brother beyond letting us know that there's conflict in the family over whatever wealth the patriarch left behind. Jesus sidesteps the request, but delivers a warning: "be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." He then tells the Parable of the Rich Fool.

The central figure in this parable is a wealthy landowner whose harvest has been so plentiful that he literally can't cram it all into his barns. His solution is to tear down those barns and build even bigger ones to store all his grain and other goods. The landowner hopes to say to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God has other plans. Calling the landowner a fool, God tells him that he'll lose his life that very night, along with whatever hope he might have had of enjoying all the riches he's piled up.

This is another parable that's unique to the Gospel of Luke. It's also in line with one of Jesus's most important themes. Elsewhere in Luke – and in the Gospel of Matthew – Jesus warns us that no one can successfully serve two masters. It's God or money – choose one. The landowner in this parable has clearly made the wrong choice.

In my pre-ordination life, I served as the General Counsel of a nonprofit that provides life insurance to military veterans, and I witnessed plenty of family fights around money. Life insurance benefits are a lot like inheritances, and they sometimes come with unpleasant surprises

for survivors. Some policy owners borrowed heavily against their plan benefits, leaving their loved ones far less money than expected. They sometimes left the money to people the family detested, or favored one child over the rest, breaking the other children's hearts. They forgot or refused to update their beneficiaries after a divorce, creating all sorts of nasty legal issues. These unfortunate situations generated hurt feelings, ugly accusations, expensive lawsuits and, I suspect, the occasional fistfight. And it's not an uncommon problem. In his book on Luke, Pope Francis observes that everyone knows at least one family that has been torn apart over an inheritance. That may be a bit of an overstatement, but probably not by much.

In telling the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus makes some interesting choices. The landowner has become particularly wealthy because his land produced abundantly, which means that God was especially generous in bestowing an ample harvest. That bounty can't have been intended just for the landowner, because God knows that the man will be dead before he can even begin to enjoy it. And yet, the landowner doesn't even consider sharing his riches with anyone else. Elsewhere in Luke, the prodigal's father celebrates his son's return by throwing a big party for the entire household. The shepherd who finds his lost sheep and the woman who finds her lost coin each call together their friends and neighbors for a celebration. All this is in keeping with the culture of the time. Bible scholar Joel Green observes that, in Jesus's community, people were expected to share whatever they had with their family and friends. But this landowner's response to his unexpected prosperity is to tear down perfectly good barns and build even bigger ones so he can hoard the entire harvest for himself. Seriously, what is wrong with this guy?

The answer may lie in one word. We might think at first that the landowner is just thinking out loud, telling himself to "relax, eat, drink, and be merry," but he isn't. He's talking to

his *soul*. This outrageously wealthy man, for all his possessions, has a soul that's terrified of facing poverty sometime in a possible future. He can't stand the fear, so he honestly – if mistakenly – decides that the way to soothe his soul's deepest anxieties is to pile up so many possessions that his soul will see them and be reassured. But, as Pope Francis and Dr. Green both recognize, hoarded possessions are never enough for long. Inevitably, fears of not having enough resurface, and the hoarder feels the itch to collect still more.

And this poor soul appears to be completely, terrifyingly alone. Jesus doesn't give the landowner any family or friends. There's no circle of empathy here, no one that the landowner could turn to for help if things got tough. Except, of course, for God. But the landowner is so fixated on his grain and other goods that he doesn't even think to thank God for them, much less try to build a relationship with the Creator who bestowed all his wealth in the first place.

The landowner's loneliness is driven home by God's final question about what will happen after his death: "and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" The landowner will have passed on, apparently with no one to inherit his wealth. His grain will spoil, and his coins will tarnish. So what use will all those riches be to anyone?

We know that Jesus's parables are designed to make his listeners think. He never hands over easy answers. So I believe Jesus is doing more with this parable than just reminding us to serve God and not Mammon. He isn't condemning the landowner for being wealthy. He's showing the crowd, and us, that a preoccupation with wealth estranges us from our loved ones and from the God who provides all good things. When we focus all of our attention on piling up riches against the risk of some future rainy day, we lose the opportunity to enjoy today's blessings and the ability to trust that, should times get tough, God will provide and our loved ones will see us through. Jesus isn't talking about sensible saving for college or retirement – he's

talking about obsessively piling up more wealth than you can ever use and refusing to give any of it to anyone else. At a time when people in the top 1% income bracket are clinging to more than a quarter of the wealth in the world, and when almost a quarter of Maryland families are struggling with hunger, Jesus's message is one we especially need to hear today.

We at St. Luke's are fortunate to have a community of love where we can share in the blessings that God showers over us all. We can study together, pray together, gather at God's table and break bread together, both in the Eucharist and in the coffee hour. Sometimes, there's even cake. Today, a beloved member of our community, Father David Showers+, is ending his time as St. Luke's interim rector. He's been generous in sharing his kindness, wit, wise insights, and delightful sermons with us. He's been a wonderful friend and thoughtful mentor to me. But the change in his role doesn't mean that he's lost to us. By God's grace, Father David+ will remain part of this community, someone whom we will continue to welcome into St. Luke's family of faith. His role will change, but David+ will continue to be a blessing to us all.

In his Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus tells us that our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions. They consist in our loving relationships with God and one another. We are called to be generous, not just with our goods but with our time, attention and love, so that we can create the circles of empathy that David+ preached on last week. God gives us good gifts so we can turn around and share them with one another. I would like to believe that the speaker's brother in today's Gospel heard Jesus's parable and decided to share the family inheritance. I am confident that the good people of St. Luke's will continue to build this church family, sharing our riches with each other and the wider community. There will be joy, laughter, comfort, gratitude, and love along the way. Sometimes, there will be cake. And God will bless this community with lives well lived. *Amen.*