

Sermon for August 11, 2019 – “Rich Fools, Bigger Barns”

19th Sunday in OT, Year C: Texts: Luke 12:13-34

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Timmy didn't want to put his money in the offering plate Sunday morning, so his mother decided to use some creative reasoning with him. “You don't want that money, honey,” she whispered in his ear. “Quick! Drop it in the plate. It's tainted!” Horrified, the little boy obeyed. After a few seconds he whispered, “But, mommy, why was the money tainted? Was it dirty?” “Oh, no dear,” she replied. “It's not really dirty. It just 'taint yours, and it 'taint mine,” she replied, “It's God's.”

We've been watching a highlight reel of Luke's gospel lately. We've heard the parable of the Good Samaritan. We stopped in for dinner at Mary and Martha's. We learned the Lord's Prayer along with the disciples who wanted to know how to pray. But today, we hit the pause button to touch on a much more taboo topic. One that Jesus brought up quite often. No, not sex. Not even politics. Today, Luke has laid upon us the issue of money and how we value it. You see, the way we understand money/wealth in the Church has a long and varied history. Some have said and continue to say that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Others would say that any wealth that's not used to help the poor is one of the greatest sins imaginable. Either way, money and its place in our lives and world elicits strong feelings in all of us. We know that money holds power over us, and we also know that putting money in its place is something with which we struggle.

Jesus is standing in a crowd teaching His disciples when two brothers come forward and ask Him to settle a dispute over inheritance. Inheritance was a complicated issue in the ancient world kind of like it is now. The eldest son of the family according to the Book of Deuteronomy received a double portion of the wealth compared to other sons. And the assets, the land, the buildings and the servants would belong more to the clan or tribe and ultimately, God than to the particular landowner. But what we tend to miss in all this is that in Jesus' day most people wouldn't be landowners. Most people were day laborer's or might have been lucky enough to have the skill to make something to sell. Landowners were wealthy and often they were the economic drivers of a community. Their land produced food, jobs, homes, and so forth. They were responsible for their communities. So when these two brothers are seeking to divide their inheritance it's possible that they'll be dividing an entire community. The estate that they look after together might not be able to adequately provide for their community once it's divided. But the two brothers aren't thinking about that. They're probably thinking about controlling their wealth themselves. And so are we at all surprised that Jesus will have none of it. He refuses to arbitrate their dispute as a respected teacher. Instead, He offers a scathing parable about greed. Often in Biblical parables the rich are portrayed as having acquired their wealth in unethical, even illegal ways. But the farmer in today's parable has **done** nothing wrong. He does not steal or cheat or break the law. He's simply the owner of land that produces abundantly. In fact, the farmer's wealth's NOT at issue in the parable. It's what the farmer **says** that seems to be the problem.

Listen to his words in verses 17-19...“I do, I have, My crops, I will do, I will pull down, My barns, My grain, My goods, I will say, My soul, I. I. I, Me. Me. Me, Mine. Mine Mine.” Yikes! In the three verses in which this farmer speaks he makes reference to himself ten, count 'em, ten times. It's easy to see that this farmer's rather self-centered, that he sees the land and grain, all his wealth, as belonging to **him**. Yet, the land would truly belong to his family.

His wealth would then belong to his community and all of his relatives that'd be working the fields along with him. But our farmer only considers **storing** his grain, stockpiling his wealth. He doesn't consider other options. Options like providing for the poor, giving his workers a bonus or sharing with relatives whose land produced exceptionally well. The farmer in this parable is a caricature. He's an exaggerated version of our human instinct to create security for ourselves. We know very well the thought process that's being outlined in this parable.

In times where there's even a small amount of extra saving it for when there's not enough is important. Today's farmers could use some harvests with extra to offset the lean years. So, it isn't the actions of the farmer in this parable that are being brought into question. Rather, as God demands the life of this wealthy farmer today the **issue** is about the proper place of money in our lives, our attitudes toward it. It isn't just about big barns, that they won't do this farmer any good once he's dead. Actually, that's pretty obvious. No, it's about the fact that storing all that grain, all that wealth in those bigger barns hasn't done **anyone** any good. What is it that we remember about people at their funeral? After they're gone? Is it the size of their grain bins? Their house? Their wardrobe or their bank account? When we see videos of their lives or collages made of a collection of photographs taken throughout their lives what do they show? Do they show people in their offices behind their desks hard at work? Of course not! In my experience, most photographs show people on vacation or at holiday gatherings with children and members of their families.

As usual, Jesus is making a point here. And the point isn't about the next life but **this** one! This absurd farmer with all his wealth has missed something. And that something is an opportunity to **build** something far more valuable than money and wealth. The farmer has missed what it means to build relationships. People are of far more value than any amount of money. Full grain bins mean nothing when there are people starving next door. And yet our world routinely chooses wealth ahead of people. Our world is full of overflowing grain bins and starving people. When Jesus scolds these two brothers for wanting to divide their inheritance it's because when He looks around His world and sees it full of people in need. People who've been left behind by the world in the struggle to obtain more and more. People who've been largely forgotten by those with riches. People who could benefit from some of that extra and abundant grain.

In 2017, the website Mental Floss took a look at how we spend money, in particular, the \$10.7 trillion that Americans spent shopping in 2016. Here's what they found: On beer alone, we spend \$96 billion which comes to 199,937,239 barrels! On fireworks, \$800 million, fixing car damage caused by potholes, \$3 billion, on road salt \$2.3 billion, on real Christmas trees \$1.3 billion, on artificial Christmas trees, \$854 million. We spend \$41.8 billion on fishing trips, \$80.55 billion on lottery tickets, \$26 billion on birdwatching, \$13.5 billion on aesthetic cosmetic surgery, \$62 billion on cosmetics, \$7.5 billion getting our nails done, \$4.6 billion playing fantasy football. We also spend an estimated \$478 billion on groceries, which is interesting because we Americans waste incredible amounts of food, and I mean incredible! In fact, according to a report released in 2018 roughly 50 percent of all produce in the United States is thrown away. That's some 60 million tons, or \$160 billion worth of produce annually, an amount constituting "one third of all foodstuffs." This is just produce, folks.

But it isn't just that Jesus reminds these brothers, and us, that those with **more** than enough can afford to share with those with **not** enough or those with nothing at all. No, Jesus reminds us that ultimately on the night when our lives are demanded of us that we too have nothing. All the wealth, all the money, all the power and security in the world means nothing in the face of death.

I love the story about a dying man who wanted to take his money with him when he died. One evening, he prayed fervently about this. An angel appeared to him and said, "Sorry, you can't take all your wealth with you after death, but the Lord will allow you to take one suitcase. Fill it with whatever you wish." Overjoyed the man got the largest suitcase he could find and filled it with bars of pure gold. Soon afterward, he died and showed up at the gates of heaven. St. Peter, seeing the suitcase, said "Hold on, you can't bring that in here with you." The man explained how God had given him special permission. St. Peter checked it out with the angel Gabriel and the story was verified. "Okay," said St. Peter, "You can bring the suitcase in with you but first I must check its contents." St. Peter opened the suitcase to see what worldly items this man had considered too precious to leave behind. "I don't believe it!" said St. Peter. "You brought pavement?"

How lucky are we when we forget the proper place of money and the value of people and relationships that God does not? That God places people above money, wealth, power and security? That God is willing to give up all those things for our sake? How lucky are we that God loves refugees in a big way? How lucky are we that God welcomes and provides for us; for us with nothing to offer, with nothing of true value to our names? Actually, that's not a rhetorical question and if you ask me, we're pretty darn lucky! God sees beyond the trappings, behind the veneer, behind our facades, and sees our true worth, our true value. And if we were to retell the parable that Jesus tells today with God as the main character instead of an absurdly rich landowner it'd sound very different wouldn't it? Especially the part where it talks about life being demanded. What would God say in that situation? What would God say if He were told that His life was being demanded of Him this very night? Anybody? Think about it. We all know **exactly** what God would say if He knew that He would die the very next day. He'd say, "**This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me.**"

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, God's wealth, which is to say God's love and God's grace, isn't stored up somewhere, locked away in some heavenly vault. It's been poured out for all of us without **qualification** and without **hesitation**. In the midst of our lives we're often more focused on what we can accumulate; wealth, titles, power, or prestige and so forth. But at the end of life no one ever wishes that they'd spent more time at work. Most people tend to be more concerned with the relationships they cultivated or failed to cultivate. Those with their friends, neighbors, and family. The old bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys wins", is quickly countered by a second bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys, still dies." Trust me, you can buy them both on Amazon!

The truth is the love, hope and peace that we share while we're here lives on well beyond us in the lives of those we've touched. Let me leave you with this challenge, it's an old Cherokee proverb, "When you were born you cried, and the world rejoiced. May you live your life in such a way that when you die the world cries and you rejoice."

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.