

Filling Your Barns with God
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Luke 12:13-21 (New Revised Standard)
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My father, who died in April of this year, served as the stewardship chairperson at my home church for several years. His favorite stewardship scripture is Jesus' parable about the farmer who builds bigger barns. When I considered which text we would consider together on this day, there was no other choice but to go with my father's favorite.

Listen to how God is speaking to you through the scripture this morning.

The crowd around Jesus was huge – thousands. So big that they were trampling on each other.

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, '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 told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

In American culture today, it is easy to deduce that indeed, our lives DO consist in the abundance of possessions. Storage units are everywhere – one is going up on Penn. I read last week that shopping malls

outnumber high schools in the US. The average American home has 300,000 items. Sometimes I feel like I have 300,000 items in my closet alone! All joking aside, the accumulation of stuff is something with which I struggle – does my purchase something for my house deprive another who is in need?

This story of Jesus could not be more contemporary. As followers of Jesus, it is good to wrestle with what it means to be rich toward God, or as Eugene Peterson says in the Message, to “fill our barns with God and not Self.”

I don't think that the problem here isn't about saving for retirement, taking time to relax and enjoy the fruits of our labor, or even about being wealthy. Jesus is painting a word picture of the tragedy of selfishness and greed.

It wasn't unusual for people to take their disputes to a learned rabbi. But, of course Jesus isn't any ordinary rabbi. He refused to take part in this dispute and sensing that the question had an underlying source – it wasn't about the stuff, it was about the spirit. So offers a parable instead.

A rich farmer has a bumper crop. He doesn't have enough room to store all the extra bounty, so he has a little conversation with himself and decides to build some bigger barns to hold all the goodies and chill out and tend to himself for his remaining days. What could possibly be wrong with that? Then, God calls him a fool and he dies.

A couple of observations about the scripture:

First, Jesus states that the land brought forth the abundant crops. (Figure of speech, but here it got my attention.) Presumably, the farmer or his servants, since we know he was rich already, planted seeds, tended the saplings, but ultimately, it is the earth and God that produces the abundance. Our farmer does not recognize that he didn't get the crops to grow all by himself.

Second: we get a rare a glimpse into the mind of the farmer. (The Bible doesn't often tell us what people think.) After receiving this windfall, the farmer's first thought is...how can I make myself available to all these goodies?

I, me, mine. In the farmers little soliloquy, he says I, me, or mine 11 times. In Jesus' day this may have surprised listeners in a way that it doesn't today, because all of life was lived in community. It would have been unheard of to think only of one's self.

Third: While Jesus offers us an explanation after his parable, it is up to each of us to figure out what it means to be rich to God, or to fill our barns with God instead of self. To live with a healthy attitude toward possessions.

Author and pastor Nadia Bolz Weber writes that we people, unlike God, see scarcity as the source of value. She write this, "The more scarce a resource is, the more valuable it is. The most valued gems and minerals are never ones you find in your own back yard. The most valued skills are not walking, or like, the ability to boil water. But the most valued skills are things like the ability to oversee a multi-national corporation and the ability to pitch a baseball more accurately than everyone else...we value these skills because they are scarce.

She continues,

But what's perverse is that we both value and fear scarcity at the same time. Our fear of scarcity leads us to see our lives through the lens of "not enough" rather than "more than enough".

Indeed, there are times when resources are scarce. When there is no oil in the lamp, no food in the cupboard, no gas in the tank and no money for rent. We see this all the time at Oak Grove – every single week. Good people working full time, unable to pay the rent or feed a family. This is very real and very difficult and as Christ followers I, me and

mine simply have no place in our vocabulary when our brothers and sisters suffer.

The challenge, Bolz writes, is when we live as though abundance is really scarcity –therefore building bigger barns is a kind of hell. Because then, regardless of how much there is, it never feels like it's quite enough. (Enough attention, food, love, time...you name it.)

And this was the farmer's predicament. He had enough to share beyond his household but was so self-absorbed that he never thought about it.

It is hard for us to imagine just how abundantly God gives – God gives with utter generosity.

Being generous begins by receiving with gratitude. By consciously recognizing that all that we have, all that we are is the gift from a generous God.

Each day, most of us eat food we did not grow, and wear clothing we did not make, drive a car or bus we didn't assemble. We are literally dependent on God and God's helpers for everything.

I recently saw *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, a film on the life of Fred Rogers, of PBS' Mr. Rogers fame. What a visionary. His love and respect for children impacted countless lives.

The movie ends with a clip of Mr. Rogers giving a graduation speech in which he reminds graduates to remember that they did not get to that place of achievement on their own. Someone or someones stood by them. He reminds them that someone talked them into talking, and someone walked them into walking, someone read them into reading. He has them call that person to mind and give thanks.

It dawned on me that the same applies to giving. Jesus gives us into giving. God gives us into giving. We give one another into giving – in our homes and here at Oak Grove.

I see it when adults and parents offer coins for kids to help fill our Noisy Offering in order to practice giving. When parents usher with children, serve communion with their youth and families serve together at Loaves and Fishes. (These are just a couple examples.)

Last week I talked with some Senior High youth about this parable. I asked them where they have experienced generosity here at Oak Grove. Not seen/observed it, but experienced it. These are the answers I got, “I experience generosity at Oak Grove because I am accepted here after coming from a church where I didn’t feel accepted.” I experience generosity when “People donate large amounts of money to youth fundraisers.” And... “The St. Martin’s always saying his to me every Sunday.”

Just yesterday I learned of a moving, living example of selfless giving – of really recognizing that all that we are and all we have are gifts from God to share.

Carol is a dear friend, a committed disciple and member of Matthews UMC in North Carolina. This coming week, in an act of generous love, Carol will donate a kidney to a fellow church member, LuAnn. When I contacted Carol about sharing her story as part of this message, she let me know that giving a kidney just seemed like the right thing to do – and far easier than when she helped me in Vacation Bible School! Through the years, Carol has volunteered in numerous positions in the church and community – from youth counselor to Bible Study leader to bringing her dog to colleges for pet therapy. One thing she’s known for is her gourmet cooking. Carol has fed just about everyone in the city at some point – either in her home – she has the gift of hospitality –by bringing a meal to a family with a new baby, or a death, or a big move. When the meal sign up went out to help Carol and her husband, Sam, with meals, in just 48 hours meals were committed until mid-January.

Each year, the church invites us all to make choices about how we spend our money, our time, all the resources gifted to us. Jesus asks us to do that every day.

In gratitude for those who gave us into giving, for the Holy One who loves us into love, for the one whose giving knows no end, with thanksgiving, let us be rich toward God.

In your bulletin you will find a slip of paper where you are free to write how you will be rich toward God or fill your barns with God. When it is time, we will be dancing our offering, our pledges and these intentions to be blessed. I read this quote this week, “When I am dancing I am a better version of myself.” We are a better version of ourselves when we are giving and sharing with God and this world.

May it be so.

AMEN