

Scripture: *[Jesus said,] "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15).*

SERMON NOTE: For this sermon I am indebted to the contributions of Audrey West, Richard Carlson, Patricia Lull, and David Schlafer as found in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 2010) 310-315.

Introduction

How did you feel as you heard this gospel text read this morning? For those of us who live in Montgomery County with a great deal of wealth, comparatively speaking, this text could be a real challenge to our life style.

Today's gospel account from Luke, chapter 12, comes during a time when Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. Along the way he has numerous opportunities to preach and teach. Often he is called upon to answer questions – some of the questions come from challengers who want to trap him; others come people who really are concerned with how they should live; still others come from people seeking something from Jesus. Such is the case in today's Gospel.

The Family Feud

In today's text Jesus is approached by an unnamed person who wants him to help resolve a family feud. This individual wants Jesus to act as a judge and tell his brother to divide an inheritance with him.

According to Judaic inheritance practices, an older brother would receive two-thirds of the estate while the younger would receive one-third. It's not clear whether this person who approaches Jesus has been unjustly treated by his brother or is just hoping to getting more, but it's clear he wants what he deems to be his fair share.

This particular conflict is not restricted to bible times. Our law courts are full of disputes between family members over inheritance issues. One pastor recounts an incident that occurred in his church.¹

The grandson of a women, after whom a Sunday School class in the church had been named, died. In his will he left his five children and his grandmother's church equal amounts of his estate. Six weeks after the reading of the will, the trustees of the little church were invited back to the lawyer's office to hear the reading of a codicil to the will. The codicil was to be opened and read only if the original will was contested by any of the heirs. Three of the children had contested the will and were seeking to break it. The codicil read in part, "I had hoped this would not have to be opened and read, but some of you have decided to seek relief from my final will and testament. Therefore, I hereby amend my will to leave all who have joined in the contestation one dollar and the remainder to be divided among the remaining heirs and my grandmother's church."

After much discussing, cussing, and threats to break the codicil, the calm measured voice of an old lawyer said: "Don't waste the only dollar you received trying a second time to circumvent your father's will."

Sadly, the father knew his children and made provisions for their greed.

¹Source unknown.

The man approaching Jesus tries to get Jesus' into his dispute with his brother. But Jesus responds instead with a **warning**, "*Take care! . . . One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*" Jesus apparently sees deeply into this man's heart and there sees greed rather than any desire for appropriate justice or fairness. So Jesus tells a short parable – the story of a man very busy accumulating things for himself and building bigger and better barns to store all his wealth.

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Now those of us who read and hear this parable might well ask, what is so wrong with storing an overrun of crops? Many of us have been taught to be frugally-minded and to make provision for emergencies in the future; so we stash excess food and supplies in silos, pantries, and basement shelves. Many of us grew up hearing Aesop's fable: *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, the point of which is the wisdom of storing up provisions for days of necessity. We have been taught, and have tried to teach our children, the importance of saving for rainy days, for retirement, for emergencies. We know that it is just prudent and wise action to guard against future economic uncertainty.

And we have biblical precedent for doing so. For this is exactly what Joseph advises Pharaoh to do after interpreting Pharaoh's dream to mean seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought: Joseph advises Pharaoh to store up the excess in the bountiful years to there will be enough for everybody in the lean years (Genesis. Chapter 41).

Frankly, saving for future material needs is actually one component of proper stewardship of God's bounty. So what do we do with today's gospel parable of the "Rich Fool"? Is Jesus actually contravening other biblical stories and advice? I don't think so.

Throughout scripture, the appropriate concern for the future is balanced by exhortations to give God the glory for all the bounty we have received, coupled with injunctions to provide for those in need who do not have access to the world's wealth or even to the basic needs of survival. The problem for the rich man in Jesus' parable is that he neither gives God any glory nor considers the needs of anyone else – he is totally self-focused! In fact, the rich man uses the personal pronouns "I" and "my" ten times in this short story. He never mentions family or friends; he never mentions neighbors; he never even considers that God might be the source of his bounty. All of these thoughts are missing from his thinking as he self-congratulates himself and tells himself that now he can "*relax, eat, drink, and be merry.*" His pursuit of wealth has caused him to become so self-centered that he cannot see beyond what he considers to be "his" harvest, "his" barns, and "his own" life! Unfortunately, he also forgets that he is mortal. In the parable, this rich man dies; and the hearse carrying his body is not pulling a U-haul trailer behind it with all his goods. He can't take it with him!

Relevance to Us

It's not difficult to see how this particular parable speaks to us today. Our culture is constantly bombarding us with media messages that life indeed consists in the abundance of our possessions. We are encouraged to spend more, have more, and use more; and we are led to believe that doing so will lead to the "good life."

So we too need to be reminded that a truly rich life is found by those who are **rich towards God**. We need to be reminded that God is the author of life and the source of all bounty. We also need to be reminded of our responsibility and need to care for others and not just for ourselves.

There is a story that I believe shows the opposite approach to wealth and possessions than that exhibited by the rich man in Jesus parable - a story that characterizes what it means to be

rich towards God²

Two brothers worked together on the family farm. One was married and had a large family. The other was single. At the day's end, the brothers shared everything equally, produce and profit.

Then one day the single brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share equally the produce and the profit. I'm alone, and my needs are simple." So each night he took a sack of grain from his bin and crept across the field between their houses, dumping it into his brother's bin.

Meanwhile, the married brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share the produce and the profit equally. After all, I'm married, and I have my wife and children to look after me in years to come. My brother has no one, and no one to take care of his future." So each night he took a sack of grain and dumped it into his single brother's bin.

Both men were puzzled for years because their supply of grain never dwindled. Then one dark night the two brothers bumped into each other. Slowly it dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another.

These two brothers found the balance between pursuing wealth and yet not becoming totally self-focused. We are called as Christians to do the same.

²As quoted by Deborah Sprink Winters in *The Minister's Annual Manual* for Preaching and Worship Planning, 2010-2011 (Inner Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions Inc., 2010) 22.