

An Invitation

Luke 12: 13-21

A lectionary text like the one this week from Luke can be a tricky one for a preacher to preach. First of all, it is so darn familiar. I'm almost certain that most everyone here or worshipping with us on-line, is not only well acquainted with the text but has already enjoyed a sermon or two (or three or four) based on it. So, it might be like watching reruns of an old TV show and you find yourself tempted to change the channel since you already know that you have seen this episode too many times already.

It is also just so simple and straightforward or at least it appears to be. It's about greed, right? And since Jesus is clearly not in favor of it neither should we...so.... don't be greedy! End of sermon, close the book, I'll see you at Backstreets.

But.... any preacher worth his or her salt is not going to let you off that easy. So, before Martha propels us into our final hymn, I invite you to look a little closer with me, a little deeper within and between the lines and see if there is more here that Jesus' story about a rich man might have to say to us.

To set the context, chapter 12 begins by saying that Jesus and the disciples are in some place (it doesn't say exactly where) and they are surrounded by a crowd, a crowd of many thousands it says. And Jesus is speaking, first of all to his disciples, and he begins to instruct them and encourage them regarding the threats and the outright persecution that they will inevitably receive at the hands of the religious authorities because of their decision to follow him. This is some heavy stuff here.

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But then, rather out of the blue it seems, a man, some guy in the crowd, pipes up with what might appear as more of a directive than a question for Jesus. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” I mean, where did that come from?

(By the way, this does establish that there is clear biblical grounding for the well-known assertion that there IS “one in every crowd.” But I digress.)

Jesus’ response might appear at first, a bit dismissive. “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” Or as we might say today, “Not my circus, not my monkeys.” But of course, that is not what Jesus meant at all.

Rather than just brush the guy off, Jesus used the situation as a teaching moment, an opportunity to go deeper for both the man, who we might call impudent, but Jesus called friend and for anyone there or since with ears to hear.

Jesus tells a parable, a teaching story, about another man, a rich man he calls him. And Jesus says the land of the man produced abundantly. THE LAND of the man. Jesus says nothing of the efforts of the man or his workers. Nothing of his agricultural abilities.

No, Jesus makes it clear here. It was the land, the earth that provided the abundance and it was a gift. Jesus knew as so ought we that “The earth is the Lords and the FULLNESS thereof.”

It seems that the rich man’s first response was to experience this abundance as more problem than opportunity. What am I going to do with all this new stuff? Surely, we understand. We know how it is.

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The closets are stuffed, the attic is full, no more room in the basement or garage. The storage building out back...already packed. And surely, we can also understand the solution he comes up with. I'll add on! he says, and then I can have it all. Surely, we can identify.

But then we hear what I think just may be one of the saddest lines in scripture. "And I will say to my soul," the rich man says to himself alone it seems, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Here was a man who in many ways was already richly blessed, a man who already lived in abundance, and yet his very soul was still hungry and thirsty and could find no peace. And he seemed to be hoping against hope that "this more," "this more" of what already did not fill him, would somehow convince his deepest self, his troubled soul, that he finally HAD enough, or perhaps that he finally WAS enough.

You see, even though Jesus described the man in the story as a "rich man" and in some ways he was, in far too many other ways he was impoverished.

-He was impoverished of gratitude. He expressed no thanks, no appreciation for his good fortune and showed no signs of feeling any. His only concern was how to acquire more and how to hold on to it.

He did not know that the tighter we hold on to something, the heavier it gets. He did not understand that the deepest joy we can gain from anything in life is the gratitude we feel for the gift that it is.

-He was impoverished of relationship. Surely with land and resources sufficient to produce such abundance there were others working with him and for him. Did he perhaps even have a family?

But we hear not one “we” or “us” or “our” from him. Just “I” and “my.” It would seem that he had no one really to celebrate his good fortune with.

-He was impoverished of generosity. He had no thought of sharing. Giving to others what he did not truly need did not seem to cross his mind.

He did not know the deep satisfaction of giving and sharing and making a difference in the lives of others. He did not understand that a hand opened to giving becomes a hand opened to receiving.

-And he was impoverished of vision. He did not know how to see beyond himself and the life he had always known. He could not see this new thing in his life, this new abundance, as perhaps an opportunity to change directions and live a more abundant life, a life with deeper meaning, one in which he no longer had to try so hard to convince his own soul to be merry.

You know there is one thing about this parable that many people may not notice, but as someone who spent over 20 years as a hospital chaplain it seems glaring to me. You see, this is an end-of-life story. God said to the man, “This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

This is how the rich man’s story ended, you see. He died that very night surrounded by more possessions than he knew what to do with but with a soul still hungry and empty and longing for peace.

Time ran out and it all came to an end that very night and he was likely alone. And if he looked back over his life in those final moments, as yes, we are prone to do, I suspect he found little there to bring him comfort.

You see my friends; I know this man. I have been at his bedside more times than I care to count, and it is a sad thing to see.

But lest I leave you there I have also been with many others in that moment who had somehow figured it out and lived a different kind of life. Those who nurtured loving relationships and a generous spirit. Those who lived with a deep gratitude for the blessings in their life. Those who felt that their life had meant something, and they had somehow made a difference. And that is a beautiful thing to witness.

Like the man I was with who after saying goodbye to his family and telling them how much he loved them and hearing them express their love and appreciation for him, just minutes before his dying breath turned to me and with a peaceful smile on his face said, "You know, I am the luckiest man on earth right now." And I understood and I agreed.

Theologian Walter Bruggeman reminds us that the Bible starts with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity. God creates, blesses, gifts. All is good.

Then even when the people are lost in the desert God's love comes down as manna, a gift from heaven, a miracle feeding. And everyone had enough. Later in the Gospel story about loaves and fishes, Jesus too performed a miracle feeding; he blessed, broke, and gave bread away. Five thousand were fed and 12 baskets were left over. Everyone had enough. All was good.

But I suspect that the truth is that this is an area of struggle for many of us. I know it is for me sometimes. We live with divided hearts. We believe in and are drawn to God's abundance. We have experienced it in precious moments of grace and gratitude.

But there is another part of us that still senses scarcity, believes that even if there is enough today it may not always be so. And that can make us anxious and discontented and yes, it can make us selfish and greedy.

And perhaps even more problematic, it can cause us to cling to things that are life limiting rather than life giving, to trust in things that do not and cannot fill the empty places in our souls.

And perhaps that is the heart of what Jesus is trying to teach us in his parable about a rich man, or perhaps more aptly put, a poor man with many possessions.

Jesus offers this story, I think, not as a condemnation of our tendency to cling to the wrong things but rather as an invitation to turn to the right things, the things that can give our life meaning and purpose, the things that truly can fill us and nourish us, the things that can give us deep joy and inner peace.

Yes, Jesus offers us an invitation to be rich; rich in the things that fill our souls and not just clutter our barns. May it be so, my friends. May it be so.