



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
Watertown, WI

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost August 4, 2013

“The Parable of the Rich Fool”

(Luke 12:13-21)

Rev. David K. Groth

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' 18 And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." Luke 12:13-21

Collect of the Day

O Lord, grant us wisdom to recognize the treasures You have stored up for us in heaven, that we may never despair but always rejoice and be thankful for the riches of Your grace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It's one of those prickly texts that we have this morning. It's about money and greed and that's a sensitive topic for most of us. So how does one preach a text that has barbs and thorns and hooks in it? I remember one of my professors saying your job is first to remind the people in the pews that these are not just some crazy ideas that I came up with on my own; these are the words of Jesus, the words of the Lord. So you hold out the biblical text in front of you as a deflection shield and you peer around it, and you say "this isn't me talking, this is Jesus talking. This is one of those texts.

A man comes up to Jesus and tries to bait him into a family squabble about money. The father has died and a fight has broken out among the children over the inheritance. I see it all the time. Often it's happening already at the funeral. In any event, one brother says to Jesus, "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." The man knows, or thinks he knows, just what ought to be done in this situation and just what Jesus should do for him. He's trying to bait Jesus to insert himself into the middle of this tiff. Jesus isn't at all interested. He refuses to answer the question. Instead, he says, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

William Willimon told a little story. As a woman was leaving church, she whispered to her pastor, "Do you have some time for me to talk with you about a matter of concern?" "What's the problem?" he asked. "Well, it's personal, but I have just been offered a promotion in my company. It's very flattering, and the money would be wonderful, but it requires more travel and I'm already

away from home more than I would like, and. . .” “Jesus doesn’t have any interest in any of that!” the pastor said, interrupting. Then he turned and began greeting other worshippers.

One reason why we study scripture and come to church on Sundays is to receive answers. We come seeking help with our daily problems and solutions to our dilemmas. And sometimes, Jesus simply isn’t interested. He doesn’t seem to care. The problems that consume us may not be those that consume Him. So instead of hearing what we want to hear from him, he comes back with something that we do not at all want to hear from him. Something that challenges us and upsets the apple cart.

And so it is in our text. The man in a feud with his brother gets no help at all from Jesus, but instead gets whacked over the head with a stark warning about greed followed by an alarming little parable. It goes like this: A farmer has had a tremendous year . . . just enough rain and sun but not too much, no damage due to blight or pests. The fertilizer did its job and the hired hands did their jobs and the result is abundance, more yield than he can possibly manage. “What shall I do?” he asks. And he answers, “I will do this: I will tear down these barns and I will build bigger barns!” Can you his glee, his exuberance?

And so he tears down those old barns and builds bigger ones, and he stuffs them full. Then, he sits back and admires all that he has. He says to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax now. Eat, drink, and be merry! You’ve earned it!” And God looks at all of this and says, “Fool! This very night your soul is required of you.” And then comes the moral of the story and no one likes it, not then, not now. But here it is: “This is how it will go for anyone who lays up treasure for himself but is not rich toward God.”

It’s the phrase “rich toward God”. . . that’s the rub. I’m sure each of us gives something back to God. The rich man in this text could probably point to something too. But are we rich toward God? Whoever is not shocked by this

story hasn't yet heard it. Are you rich toward God . . . or kind of stingy?

Mark Twain said it's not the parts of the Bible that he *doesn't* understand that bother him. It's the parts that he understands perfectly well! Jesus is again clamping down on the subject of greed and material possessions. It seems Jesus has more to say about this topic than anything else. This rich fool has filled his silos to the brim; there is no room for anything else. But his silos and barns are not the only things that are full. His soul is also full. The soul that God created and stamped with God's own image, has been filled with stuff, with money and possessions and other such silage. In other words, there is no space in his soul for God. He has wrapped his grubby hands around possessions, money, security. There's no room for God in those clenched fists. And God says, "he's a fool."

When describing Ebenezer Scrooge, Charles Dickens said this: "Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge [was]! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scarping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"

Think of it. A fist can do many things. It can hammer a nail. It can grab hold of something and not let go. A fist can be used as a weapon. But the one thing a clenched fist cannot do is receive. This rich man has so wrapped his hand around material possessions that there's no way for him to receive or hold on to God or give back to God.

Now, the danger is, we hear this text and think, "I know who Jesus is talking about." We can all think of people who are richer than we are but who don't have much room for Christ. But there are lots of slippery moments when you and I sell ourselves out, when our passion for doing good or serving others or hearing God's Word, when all that is swept aside for a fat pay-check or another chance to go shopping or to do maintenance on all our rotting stuff. There are lots of times when all of us bow down to the idol.

Matthew Harrison, the president of our church body has more than once mentioned pastors who, when they receive a call, talk a lot about weighing where they can best

serve, and how they are praying for direction and discernment, and it takes them many weeks. In the end, they sell themselves out to the highest bidder. O yes this parable of Jesus steps on a lot of toes.

This rich guy in the story talked to his soul. Maybe we should all do that and ask, "Soul, to whom do you belong?" Does your life resemble an open hand that is rich toward God . . . or does it more resemble a clenched fist holding on tightly to whatever we've been given? Does your soul belong to its rightful owner, the one who crafted you? Or, does it belong to all the stuff, the possessions, the investment accounts? Maybe we should all do a little soul searching.

All week long we are out there in the marketplace competing, grabbing, producing. In our society we are groomed from early childhood to consume. Often we are referred to more as consumers rather than human beings. And we are not just victims but willing participants. We grub about, grabbing, seeking, buying, anything to fill the emptiness, confused over what we want, not knowing what we truly need. Advertisers are happy to help us out; happy to clear up the confusion, happy to create a need where there was none.

Every time Apple comes out with the newest I-phone, I fear I'm falling a little further behind on the tech curve, and that with one or two more iterations I will be past the point of no return; I'll never be able to catch up. Just last week, my daughter saw me pounding out a text message, and I thought I was going at a brisk pace of five or six words a minute. She looked concerned for me, which was itself disturbing. Her eyebrows said "You pathetic creature, you", but her lips asked, "You need help with that?" The problem, of course, is not me . . . it's the phone. How am I to type on that keyboard? The answer of course is to buy a newer, bigger, faster, stronger phone, right . . . and the plan to go with it.

All week long, that's the message we get out there. What you have isn't enough. It's antiquated and it's

antiquating you. Your old barns are too small. You *need* bigger barns!

You know, the church gets beaten up in the world, and some of it is well earned. But throughout history the church has been that rare friend who has the courage to tell you what you don't want to hear. The church holds up the mirror of God's Word and shows us what we look like. TS Elliot wrote: "Why should men love the Church? She tells them of Life and Death, and of all they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft. She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts."

The church tells us what we don't want to hear. Moreover, in our culture saturated by consumerism, most of us feel more at home in a mall than at church. For us, the Johnson Creek Outlet Mall is our natural habitat; church is a foreign landscape with a different set of values. But we desperately need the church to tell us the truth about our lives. You won't get that from the Nike Store or Ralph Lauren.

Sunday after Sunday we stumble out of the marketplace chaos and into the church's arms for an hour or so, and she holds us tight and through the Word of God and hymns and prayer we hear the voice of God saying, "You are not a consumer. You are a child of God and your soul belongs to me." And then that same voice of God challenges us to loosen the grip on what we're holding onto so tightly. Open the palm and give some of it away.

So we take up an offering, not because God needs the money, though certainly there is much good that could be done if we were more generous. God teaches us to tithe, not because God needs it, but because we do. A tithe, ten percent of what you receive from him. And his Word has the gall to say, "It's actually for your own good." Our tithe is our last defense against a world bent on turning us into mere consumers. A tithe says to the idols of consumption and material abundance, you may own 90% of me, but you're not going to own all of me. With this ten percent I draw the line

somewhere, I leave some space for God to get in. With our tithe we say to Madison Avenue, you don't have me yet. I will give at least a fraction of my life back to the one who gave all of his to me.

And that's what we're doing. We're only giving back what was already his. If you're a farmer, he's the one who makes the seed to crack and the roots to sprout and the grain to grow. If you're a carpenter, he's the one who gives you the strength to join wood to wood snug and firm and flush. If you're in business, he's the one who makes your voice work for the sale and your brain and who gives you the gift of coworkers and customers. Whatever we give to God, we are giving back to God. If you want to be rich toward God as Jesus said in our text, the tithe is the place to start.

And shortly after the offering we come up to the altar, we who hold on so tightly to so much, we come forward finally with empty hands. We open them up and stretch them out, and allow them to receive the Body and Blood of Christ for forgiveness.

Just before his death, Jesus had a meal with his closest friends in the upper room. He knew what was happening, who would betray him. Judas was there, a disciple like the rest of us. He had heard Jesus' preaching about the Kingdom of God, the lilies in the field, the parable of the rich fool. Judas had professed, just like us, to be a follower Jesus, one of his disciples – but he threw it all away for a fistful of coins.

The next day, Friday, our brother Judas nailed Jesus to a cross with those coins. And as our Lord hung there on that cross, hands wide open to the world, blood covered hands wide open, he simply said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Forgive them, even fools like them." Amen.

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