

Pentecost 8C (8/4/2019)  
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23  
Psalm 49:1-12  
Colossians 3:1-11  
**Luke 12:13-21**

*When is enough enough? Money is the most common idol on earth, fueling the urge to acquire ever greater security and status. But, a preoccupation with wealth impoverishes our lives in other ways. When we acknowledge that every good thing comes as a gift, and when we accept that enough is enough, we break free from greed's grip for the sake of abundant life.*

Indian priest Anthony de Mello told this story:

A rich industrialist from the North was shocked to find a Southern fisherman resting beside his boat. "Why aren't you fishing?" he asked.

"Because I have caught enough fish for the day," the fisherman answered.

"Why don't you catch some more?"

"What would I do with them?"

"You could earn more money," the industrialist insisted. "With that, you could fix a motor to your boat, go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough money to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats, maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me."

"What would I do then?"

"Then you could really enjoy life."

The fisherman paused for a moment, and said, "What do you think I'm doing right now?"

This parable is akin to the one we find in our Gospel from Luke today. The central character in Jesus' story, who is often called the "rich fool," can think of nothing other than acquisition and personal gratification. *What shall I do with my excess resources?* he asks himself, for he has no one else to consult. "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."

"You fool!" God chides, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will be they be?"

"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus summarizes in advance, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Note that the problem is not the size of the rich man's harvest in itself, as one interpreter points out, but rather his "insistence on gathering all of it and storing it up for his own use."<sup>1</sup> In other words, **this is not a story about abundance per se, but accumulation.** Why is accumulation such a hazard, do you think? Isn't it a wise business plan to maximize output and save for a rainy day? Where is the line between prudence and greed?

It's no coincidence that the first person singular possessive adjective dominates the rich fool's internal monologue: "my crops, my barns, my grains, my goods, and... my soul."<sup>2</sup> Not once does he express anything resembling reverence, gratitude, or generosity. There's no indication that he recognizes his

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 256.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

good fortune or assumes any responsibility for the well-being of his community. He is consumed by his own interests. Thus, **the rich fool is a caricature of greed, a tragic case of self-centered solitude.**

**And in this way, the rich fool is also an idolater.** In our second reading from Colossians, the Apostle Paul insists that new life in Christ puts to death all that is resistant to God, of which greed is worthy of explicit mention. And greed is idolatry. Martin Luther goes a step further, calling wealth “the most common idol on earth.” He writes, “Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise.”<sup>3</sup> **Wealth**, in other words, **displaces God as our ultimate object of trust.**<sup>4</sup>

Jesus understands the desire for accumulation. He knows that for those of us who struggle to trust God, enough is never quite enough, and the lure of money fuels the urge to acquire ever greater security and status. But, Jesus also knows that **a preoccupation with wealth impoverishes our lives in other ways. Worldly treasure has a way of diverting our attention away from God and neighbor.**

Franciscan mystic Richard Rohr reflects on this truth as it pertains to this nation’s origins:

Almost all of us end up being casualties of... Greek *hubris*. Some even appear to make it to the “top,” but there is usually little recognition of the many shoulders they stood on to move there, the many gratuitous circumstances that made it possible for them to arrive there, and sometimes the necks they have stood on to stay there....

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<sup>3</sup> The Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 387.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 16:13.

I am sure many slaveholders in the South were “self-made men” and perhaps never in their entire lives had to face a situation where they did not “succeed.” Such a refusal to fall kept them from awareness, empathy, and even basic human compassion. The price they paid for such succeeding was an inability to allow, join, or enjoy “the general dance.” They “gained the whole world, but lost their soul,” as Jesus put it. They did their survival dance, but never got to the sacred dance, which by necessity includes everybody else. If it is a sacred dance, it is always the general dance too.<sup>5</sup>

**What Rohr calls joining the “sacred dance,” a dance that cannot be danced alone, is what Jesus means by becoming “rich toward God.” It is to recognize the bountiful harvest for what it is – the manifestation of God’s desire that all might eat and be satisfied,<sup>6</sup> that those who have much should not have too much and those who have little should not have too little.<sup>7</sup> To join the sacred dance is to revel in the joy of shared abundance, through gratitude to God and love for the world God also loves.**

Dear church, every good thing comes as a gift. Yet, what is mine is never really mine. “Did you not come naked from your mother’s womb,” Saint Basil of Caesarea asked in the fourth century, “and will you not return naked to the earth?”<sup>8</sup> **We are stewards of all that is given to us, not owners; our material blessings are meant to be held lightly and shared widely. And, this is good news! The riches that await us beyond the confines of our anxious self-preoccupation are plentiful. If only we can accept that enough is enough, then we can break free from greed’s grip for the sake of abundant life.**

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<sup>5</sup> *Falling Upward*, 71-2.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 22:26.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:15.

<sup>8</sup> <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2019-8-4/2014#resources>.