**Luke 12:13-18** August 25, 2019

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*Luke 12:13Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” 14Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” 15Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

*16And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ 18Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” ’ 20But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ ”*

*21“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Watch and Guard against Greed!**

When someone gets back from vacation, you expect, you just expect them to wear a smile. I mean, if you can’t be happy after a week or two of doing whatever you want to do, can anything ever make you happy? We know people expect us to be happy after vacation. So much so that even if we did not have a good vacation, we still tell people we did and downplay the negatives as much as possible—except in the worst of circumstances.

Your pastor stands before you today after a couple weeks of vacation, and you expect him to have a sunny disposition after a good time. You expect a happy message reflective of a well-rested mind and soul. That’s what I would like! But I find myself fighting with the words of Jesus today. Take a good look at the reading and you won’t find much cheerfulness. It’s not grouchiness. Jesus was never grouchy. But it is a hard talk we might not like hearing.

On a related note, try going to a Hallmark store. Look at the walls plastered with living room décor. Lots of plaques and pictures and wall art with positive themes like “Live, Love, Laugh,” or humorous themes: “I love you even more than bacon,” and then there are the religious, and then the profane. All of it sweet or sentimental or humorous. I get it. Facebook is the same, and YouTube, and Instagram. We have gotten so used to those saccharine-sweet clichés that Jesus in our reading today sounds like a regular Grinch, and today’s preacher one of his minions. I mean, who ever went into a Hallmark store and bought a framed picture saying, ***“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed”***? Who has hung this one on the wall: ***“This very night your life may be demanded of you. Then what will you do?”*** If you see that one in a house and you might not come back a second time.

So what would make Jesus say stuff like that? Well, have you ever had a job in retail, dealing with “the public”? Try working a few shifts at the McDonald’s drive-through and you will find out.

Jesus is out there teaching and preaching like he always does about the kingdom of God. Crowds are all around him. And this guy from nowhere pipes up, ***“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”*** Really? He comes face to face with the Son of God and that’s his wish? He wants to air his dirty laundry and Jesus to referee a petty family squabble?

If you could have one conversation with God, what would you talk about? Do you remember last week’s Old Testament reading? It was Abraham standing before God, all alone. Just Abraham and God in the cool of the day while the neighbors are on their porch swings or firing up their grills. Abraham stood before God and said, “All those wicked, evil, obnoxious people down there in that sewer we call Sodom and Gomorrah—please don’t destroy them.” God raised an eyebrow. “OK.” “No,” said Abraham, “I really mean it. Please, please, please don’t destroy them.” And he pleaded for them. That was Abraham’s face-to-face conversation with God. He used his one wish in prayer for others.

But in front of Jesus this man out in the crowd says, “Hey, Teacher! My brother is cheating on Dad’s inheritance money. Quit teaching and help me sort this out!” Jesus dismisses him with a single sentence, ***“Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”*** which is, I think, the quickest dismissal Jesus every gave anyone. It’s like Jesus is saying, “You stand before the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the one who will judge your soul at the end of life, and are quibbling about money? Get lost! You are lost!”

This prompts Jesus to issue a warning about how money can get a person all turned around. He tells a parable of a rich man whose field produced an abundant harvest. Now when we look at the parable, it is really important for us to identify the main point. Jesus is identifying a heart problem, a sin. But what is the sin?

Is it that the man is rich? After all, the first thing that Jesus said about him is that he is ***“a certain rich man…”*** Some would like to hear Jesus saying, “You see, rich people are bad people because they have more than other people.” But we know that is not the case from the rest of the Bible. Abraham was exceedingly rich. Job was too. God was OK with that. Mary and Martha, and Lazarus were at least modestly rich, yet Jesus called Lazarus “friend” (John 11:11). The list could go on. The problem wasn’t that he was rich.

Nor should we fault this man for tearing down his old barns and building new ones. Didn’t Jesus tell his disciples that if someone wants to build a tower, he must first estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to finish the job? (Luke 14:28-30). Planning ahead, being a good steward of God’s gifts is a good thing. No, building bigger barns wasn’t the problem.

Let’s strip away all the things that can confuse us about what the real problem was in Jesus’ parable. The problem was the way the man thought. Listen to him think to himself: ***“What shall I do?... I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ ”*** All of these blessings. All this wealth. All these plans. It is all about him. The problem isn’t the blessings, it is how he thinks about his blessings.

As this rich man falls to sleep with dollar signs floating through his dreams, God shouts into his dream, “Fool!” [The Greek doesn’t even have the “You” part. Just “Fool!”] He may be a good farmer and a good planner, but he is a fool. He can’t tell what is really important. His attitude is the problem. One of the more misquoted Bible passages is when people say, *“Money is the root of all kinds of evil.”* That’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says, *“The* love *of money is the root of all kinds of evil”* (1 Timothy 6:10). When my motivation for work, for planning, for retirement, for anything is merely what I get out of it, I am in trouble. I am greedy.

It is important to know what greed is in God’s judgment, not ours. We think Jesus was just talking to this man bent out of shape over inheritance money, or greedy price gougers or online fraudsters. But maybe you missed something important in our reading. Do you notice to whom Jesus told this parable? Maybe you think he spoke this parable to the guy who said, ***“Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”*** You missed something very important: ***“Then [Jesus] said to them…”*** Not to him, but to them; to the crowd listening attentively, to the ones who didn’t come to Jesus for money.

You see, Jesus wasn’t shouting down a greedy man, he was warning his dearly beloved. Jesus knows how often people have walked away from God when they became prosperous. Jesus knows how many young people once pledged faithfulness to God and his word in confirmation and then got confused about what is important. Greed isn’t just about bank accounts with six or seven figures. Greed is any preoccupation with anything or everything this world offers: “When I just get that car.” “That should would be cool to hold one of those in my hand and show it off to my friends.” Subscriptions to games and music and clothes. Highest paying job possible.

Jesus dismissed the greedy brother. But to Jesus told *us* the parable of the rich fool. He said to his people, to me, to you, ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”*** Us! Against greed be like a deer in the meadow. As soon as it hears you coming it perks up its ears and then runs. It doesn’t care whether you have a gun or not. It looks and runs because it instinctively knows it can’t afford to make a mistake. “Be like that,” Jesus says, ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed!”***

Rarely have I heard someone say (though I have a few times, God bless them!), “I couldn’t take that job because I need to be in church on Sunday.” I just about always hear the opposite. “Sorry, Pastor. Can’t get to church ’cuz I have to work.” Where is God in that picture?

People say that when they win the lottery, they will pay off the church mortgage. So you are going to help the church when it doesn’t cause you the least bit of pain? Fine. But what about now when it does hurt, when it does mean eating out one less time a week, or not eating out at all this month?

New car, new clothes, new whatever? Can you point out anyone out there who has a shirt on their back because of you.

When you are looking at that once or twice-in-a-lifetime event where you inherit a significant amount of money, is God anywhere in your starry-eyed dreams? How about the year-end bonus?

When you set out your budget for the month, does God get the left-overs? Or is he the first line-item at the top of the spreadsheet?

Before you start thinking this guy must have somehow really got under Jesus’ skin, before you start thinking, “Pastor must not have had a very good vacation,” think about this: “Why do you warn people?” You don’t warn people you hate, you warn people you love.

There are times and places for serious talks with our children. We need to have conversations with them about all the bad things out there and the bad things in here [point to heart]. We wish those things would just go away so we didn’t have to have those talks—but they won’t, so we have to have those not-so-happy conversations. And so when Jesus tells us to “watch out!” and follows it up with God coming to a man in his dreams, calling him a fool and telling him he is going to die, this isn’t grouchy Jesus, this is concerned Jesus.

He has done everything necessary to get us to heaven. He has created faith in our hearts. For those saved by the waters of baptism, saved through faith, Jesus’ greatest concern is, “If only you don’t throw it away! Don’t get greedy for the tinsel-plated treasures of this world! Realize that a Savior is the highest gift of God you could hope for!”

The sinful human nature inside of us is so deceitful that whenever it hears words of warning, it is sure that those words comes from hateful people. Our sinful nature is so arrogant that whenever people correct us, we buck it. That sinful nature does not want to be told that some things are off limits. It firmly believes it does have a God-given right to the pursuit of happiness, whatever that might require. It does not want to share anything significant unless it senses a generous payoff somewhere.

Lord, save us from ourselves!

There is a prayer tucked away in the Old Testament, a beautiful prayer that prays *against* what we want. It is a good prayer to pray when tempted by greed. It’s not a prayer that the televangelists are going to teach you to pray. But here it is: *“I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die… give me only my daily bread. // Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’”* (Proverbs 30:7-9) Now that is a prayer for when you start to sense that maybe your heart has gotten confused about what is really important in this world. Amen.