

Abundance is a Shared Experience

Second of three sermons in the 2019 Stewardship “Caretakers” series
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- Luke 12:13-21, 48b Good News Translation ¹⁹Then I will say to myself, Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself! ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?’”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: As “Caretakers” of the gifts God entrusts to us we discover that abundance results from sharing them for a common good.

Each week we hear from the Bible. We do that not simply to increase our biblical literacy – our awareness of the Bible’s content. We *listen for the word of God* from the Bible. We listen for guidance in how to be like Jesus, how to live our lives in ways that reflect his spirit and carry out his mission. So as I continue this Stewardship sermon series on our role as “Caretakers” in God’s creation, I pull lessons for us directly from Biblical texts.

My text this morning is a parable found in the twelfth chapter of Luke’s gospel. Luke actually introduces a “red herring” just before the parable. A red herring, of course, is an expression meaning a point or argument that distracts from the issue at hand. (Maybe you already knew, but I just learned that the term “red herring” comes from the process of training hunting dogs. While teaching dogs to follow a fox’s scent the trainers would drag fish across the trail as a way of teaching the dogs to ignore distracting stimuli and stay on the fox’s trail.)

In the gospel, the red herring is the appeal by some bystander in the crowd for Jesus to help him get the inheritance he’s due. Inheritance laws were very clear in ancient Jewish culture; the man knew what he was supposed to receive as a younger son of the deceased. Maybe the bystander felt that his older brother was slow in administering the estate of their late father. But the crassness of publicly demanding his inheritance reveals an unattractive attitude of greed on the part of the younger son. Jesus tells the bystander, “You need to be talking to your brother about that, not to me.” Jesus doesn’t get sucked into the red herring of that fraternal fracas.

But then Jesus does pick up on the bystander’s motivation for demanding the resolution of his inheritance: the man was preoccupied with getting his hands on wealth. So Jesus launches into a parable about a wealthy farmer who thought of no one other than himself:

- The rich man didn’t think about his family (maybe he didn’t have any, but it’s more likely that his self-centered attitude had caused great damage to all those relationships);
- The rich farmer didn’t think about his employees or workers. He had to have some, but he never mentions them;
- He didn’t think about people on neighboring farms or in the village nearby;
- He didn’t even think about the place of God in giving him life, giving him success in farming.

He thought only of himself. If you have any doubt about that, let me read again for you of the soliloquy he offers in the parable (I'm going to emphasize certain words for a reason that quickly will become clear). Thinking to himself the rich farmer says,

"I don't have a place to keep all my crops. What can I do? This is what I will do.... I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I will store the grain and all my other goods. Then I will say to myself, Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself."¹

Was he born oblivious to his place in an interconnected, interdependent society? Or did he grow to become completely self-centered because he embraced the easy path of laziness or the seductive allure of hedonism? "The man has shut out everyone else from his life and his thoughts. There is no one else in the story – just the man and his possessions."²

For that reason Jesus calls him a "fool." A fool doesn't get it. A fool is clueless. A fool is ignorant of what's right in front of him, all around him. A fool is oblivious of the network of social connections that surround and support him. A fool's folly is in imagining that there is no source of wisdom or power or blessing or mercy greater than himself or herself.

To make matters worse, this foolish farmer has an odd, indeed a wasteful way of dealing with the good fortune of a bumper crop. What did he say his plans were? He's going to pull down his barns and build bigger one:

- He's going to throw away the value of his existing barns.
- He's going to spend money demolishing perfectly good barns.
- Finally, he's going to spend money on barns large enough to accommodate one season's abnormally large harvest.

Notice that it's not the unusually large size of the harvest that causes the problem. It's the rich farmer's response. He doesn't think about anyone or anything other than himself.

That's not how God works.

The majesty and mystery of all creation are the result of God's infinite power and creativity being played out in ways that our greatest scientific minds continue to explore and understand and ponder. God's goodness brought this world into existence through processes that unfolded over the course of time measured in billions, and our species over time measured in millions. And in time measured just in thousands God chose to reveal God's own generous, compassionate, merciful, loving nature in our own form in Jesus of Nazareth, God's own being born in human form.

That's how God works: creating, caring, giving, sharing, seeking goodness for all creation. We are because of God's abundant grace shared with us for our sake.

The parable's ending is ominous for the rich fool: God informs him that that very night will be his last, and once he's dead, what difference will it make to him how much he has accumulated for himself? What's true today was true then: hearses don't come with luggage racks. When you die you'll not be taking "stuff" with you.

At the very beginning of Chapter 12 Luke says that Jesus was speaking to two audiences as he told this parable. There were the twelve disciples, of course. But they were surrounded by a crowd of thousands, a crowd so thick and pressing in on the disciples that the crowd was stepping all over one another. And of course, there's a third audience: you and me today. To those three crowds Jesus implies an "alternate ending" to the parable. The parable tells a story of

¹ Luke 12:17-19 Good News Translation (emphasis added)

² New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX: Luke-John. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 256b

selfishness, self-centeredness, foolishness and futility. But it's the unspoken alternate ending that is the purpose of the parable.

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Think of the story of the Feeding of the Five-Thousand. You know the story³: Jesus is having a training session with his disciples near the town of Bethsaida on Galilee's northern shore. Locals learn that he's in the area and they flock to the area outside of town where he welcomes them to join his "class" for his team. As sunset nears the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowd home because it's dinnertime. Jesus tells them, "*You* give them something to eat." Twelve disciples, feeding 5,000 people? But their faith and trust in Jesus inspired them to act with courage and consideration for others. The disciples reached into their shoulder bags to pool their resources, humble as they were: five loaves of bread and two smoked fish. What happened? That which they had – brought together, blessed by God – that which they had met the need at hand... with more than enough to spare – when it was all over, they collected twelve baskets of leftovers!

The parable of the Rich Fool is a cautionary tale warning that self-centeredness is not only foolish but also unbecoming, inconsiderate, wasteful, and an affront to God's compassionate and generous nature. The parable's implied lesson encourages us to recognize our calling to be "Caretakers" of the gifts God gives us – caretakers not merely for our own desires, but with an eye to the needs of the world around us. When we appreciate our role as God's "Caretakers," when we exercise our Caretaker role through our personal generosity and through the gifts we invest in our church's ministry and mission, that's when we truly appreciate how abundance is the result of our shared experience.

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³ cf. Luke 9:10-17