

RICH FOOL
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Psalm 107; Hosea 11: 1-11; Luke 12: 13-21; Colossians 3: 1-11

For so many weeks now I have been opening or praying in this service about horrendous events that occurred during the previous week, and going on about how grateful we should be for our own relative shelter and peace in this place and how it would allow us to open ourselves to the nature of the plight of others. Last week was the same, of course. As I was writing this, it was reported that a gunman had killed several people in Munich and earlier in the week, a teenager with an axe killed people riding on a train in Germany. And then so quickly after that came the rampage at the teen party the nightclub in Fort Myers, Florida and then an elderly priest and some parishioners in France were killed. All this and more I am sure, since last I gave a sermon.

Now, as we come to the passage from Luke that is before us today, it seems we have even more of an opportunity to talk of this. Why? Well, the short, short answer is that things could be over in a second. And that is what Jesus has to say about it too.

So, let's go back for a minute.

The story starts when Jesus is interrupted while he is talking to a crowd. Of course, he is always talking to a crowd. And the man who interrupts him is so obsessed with his thought that he likely has no notion that he has interrupted with his personal business. Apparently, and just parenthetically,

this kind of thing used to happen quite often, that people would ask for personal advice in the middle of an address. Anyway, in this case, he asks that Jesus tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Jesus tells the man that it is not Jesus' job to do that, and then he is reminded of the parable of the rich fool. And that is our reading from Luke today, the parable of The Rich Fool. The Rich Fool had been such a good farmer that he had more crops than he literally knew what to do with. Pleased with himself, he thought to build a new and larger barn so that he might have space to store all his crops and all his goods – and “I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” Jesus prefaces the story by saying that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” and he ends it by saying that God calls the man a fool because he has stored up treasure for himself but “is not rich toward God.” The lesson here, the richness as it were, lies in what is meant by “rich toward God.” Fortunately we have had two weeks of conventions to tell us all how to be good people.

The parable is certainly a caution against greed and the all too frequent human focus on the accumulation of goods as the purpose of life. Indeed, how do these goods serve us if they are stored in the barn? Literally, we might even take this parable to a discussion of farming technology – how long will the crops last anyway before they rot? The rich fool is not going to be rich for very long with a barn full of spoiled feed and produce. One lesson there is that the only value of the crops is their transformation into food for people and animals, into fuel and energy. There is something to be valued in the very transitory nature of what we store. It’s an economic lesson too – what business or investment advisor would recommend

keeping money under the mattress? No, it needs to be used for maximum effect, invested, not necessarily in the stock market, but in activities, education, businesses, community and so forth. So, money is never the ultimate goal; just like crops, what counts is what it can do.

But more important than that, at least for what we are talking about today, is this - just after the farmer says that he may as well eat, drink and be merry, "God said to him, 'You fool! This very night, your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

Now despite the fact that this story begins with the anxious request from the brother for the division of the family inheritance, I do not believe that this parable is about being careful not to die intestate. No, this is about not wasting your life, for you never know when it might be over. "So it is," the parable ends, "with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God." Jesus is saying that it is the things, or as we would say, the stuff, that now both own the man and that claim his life, for he is spending all his resources on conserving them and once he is gone, it will make no difference at all. Except that he could make a difference if he would look outward from himself and see how those goods could be put to use in the world, for even after he was gone, the good use to which he had put them would carry on. Rather than building a larger barn to store what he has accumulated, of course, the answer is to find a mode of distribution to those who are in need. He needs to turn himself to the problems that are so evident all around him, rather than tuning his back and determining what he can do to isolate himself in his fortress barn. And surely if there are tragic refugee problems today, there were tragic refugee problems then as well.

But unfortunately, much of what we learn today is that the road to happiness is the accumulation of MORE - more goods, more money, more houses, boats, cars, clothes, art, toys, electronics - whatever it is that assaults one's eye, it must be owned, consumed. It cannot simply be admired, commented upon and passed by, but it must be grasped and made ours. That is our way of life. And it also leads, among other things, to a very physically crowded environment, just as Jesus' farmer found.

Thus, in our lives today, we are overwhelmed with advice about what to do with all our stuff. De-clutter advice is almost like Pokemon Go in its allure. There was a recent NY Times article on a book by a Japanese woman, Marie Kondo, a very well known consultant on getting rid of stuff. Her main goal it seems is to make people happy, to give them joy, by the elimination of unneeded and unwanted stuff. The author of the article followed Marie Kondo about on various consultations and book talks and heard her speak of the need for the happiness that the absence of unneeded stuff would bring. The author of the article went home. She got rid of a lots of stuff. Then she had a psychological revelation and found that stuff and clutter or the lack of it had nothing at all to do with her level of happiness. It did not matter whether she was cluttered or uncluttered, her degree of happiness was related to matters altogether different.

But Jesus' parable is a distinct warning. He is saying that this focus on accumulation is greed and can lead to a point where life's meaning is reduced to material things. The driving force of living becomes a search for "more" - a search for things. Greed, in fact, breaks the commandment

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” and thus the statement in Colossians, “Greed, which is idolatry.” Desire for material things may grow into the kind of greed that can distort and then destroy the meaning of your life. This desire for material things has become the overarching design of our society in many respects, the energy of our economy and businesses, and so it is not to be wondered at that so many of us respond with our lives spent in the search of goods to attain. But for or so many of us the attainment of those goods is impossibly difficult, and the goal, whether attainable or not is the cause of immense amounts of stress and often what would seem wrong behavior.

If the culture is about the accumulation of goods and if most people cannot respond by getting more goods, there is likely to be trouble, and we are certainly having lots of trouble right now. In Paul Simon’s new song “Wristband”, he sings of what happens when people can’t get into a club without a wristband:

*The riots started slowly/ With the homeless and the lowly,
Then they spread into the heartland/Towns that never got a wristband
Kids that can’t afford the cool brand/Whose anger is a shorthand
And if you don’t have a wristband/ Then you don’t get through the door
No you don’t get through the door/ No you don’t get through the door.*

This is often how these things like riots start because not everyone can play the same game of accumulation. Nor should we be doing it anyway because it is the waste of a life.

But, Jesus is saying, and I am saying and probably all of you are saying too, “Well, we just have to resist this because every day our life is being demanded of us!” There is too much trouble in the world for us to be worrying about getting more stuff or even cleaning up stuff. Please, let us just worry about what we might possibly do about all these people fighting for a place at the table. And it is so difficult to get a place at the table and if we could just use some of what we have to make that table longer and the seats a little more accessible, I am sure that everyone would feel so much better.

Let us pray:

Lord,
Help us to find ways to turn ourselves out to the world and use ourselves in ways that are helpful... demand our life of us.
Amen