

Luke 12:13-21

"A Fool and His Money"

When Danny and I travelled through the Holy Land with a group from our Presbytery in 2009, we were led by a minister who had been to Israel and Jordan four times within the span of about 10 years. He said that the one significant change that he saw each time that he went was the way the water supply was dwindling. According to Dr. Baily, with each visit the Jordan River narrowed more and more and the Dead Sea grew Deader and Deader! In fact, because the Dead Sea is shrinking by about 3 feet each year, the lowest point on earth is roughly 1,300 feet below sea level.

The reason that I share this is because in Jesus' day, the only thing worthy of dispute in what we now call the Middle East was land. And of course with land ownership bearing the rights to both water and oil, the same is true today. Our Scripture reading this morning is a case in point.

In Luke's gospel, a crowd had gathered around Jesus as he spoke and someone interrupted his teachings with a request for Jesus to settle a dispute. It seems two brothers had inherited some land and the way the will was read had caused friction in the family. Possibly, because Jesus had a reputation for fairness and wisdom, one brother called on Jesus to be the arbitrator of the case. Yet, Jesus saw into the man's soul and recognized his lust for things so clearly that I suspect this brother was really just looking for Jesus to side with him.

Or perhaps the problem at hand was this: the inheritance and already caused separation in the family and the unknown petitioner wants Jesus to finalize the division. He wants to take

his prosperity, separate himself from the other brother, and basically eat, drink and be merry!

But of course, Jesus is too wise to get sucked into his plan.

Instead, Jesus tells a parable. A man has such a good year with his crops that he literally has no place to store all of his blessings. Now Jesus does not criticize his wealth, in fact he does not even tell us how his wealth became so abundant. There is however, no indication that the man did anything special to make his crops so productive, so we can assume that this was just a windfall – and unexpected gift.

It is also clear that the man in the parable has already decided what to do with his wealth. He has made the decision to store it – to keep it all for himself. So the problem that he is faced with is deciding how to preserve what he has been given. His conclusion is to tear down the barns that he has and build bigger ones, enabling him to store more stuff.

When I first read this, I thought of the words in Ecclesiastes 3, "There is a time to keep and a time to throw away" and then had to laugh. I am constantly throwing away things that my husband thinks we need to save. When I question him about the value of an old birthday card, a rubber tip that looks like it came off of something or a towel that will never be white again, he will declare that there may be something that he will need it for *one day* that is *really* important and I will humor him, put it in a drawer and then throw it away later.

I was instantly reminded of the book For Everything a Season by Quaker minister Philip Gulley. In it he writes about a lady in his congregation who never throws anything away. He says: "She has four couches in her living room because when she buys a new couch, she can't bear to discard the old one. Couches line her walls – five in all. Four in her living room and one in her kitchen, pulled up to the table. You sit at the couch and eat, your plate at eye level. She

also saves newspapers, magazines, soup labels and coffee cans. In her closet is a box labeled *String too Short to Use.* Well, if I went to visit her, I think I would break out in hives.

So at first glance, the parable is clearly a warning against greed. The man needs to understand that when one has been given so much, one is called by God to share one's gifts. However, Luke makes sure that we understand that the parable is told for everyone there – NOT just the brother with the family dispute. It's told for you and me, too.

This calls to mind the first warning about greed that God gave Moses. As Moses led the children of Israel through the desert, they began to complain about their lack of food. You may remember that God rained down manna from Heaven. But he asked Moses to instruct the Israelites only to take enough manna for ONE day.

After years of living as slaves, their memories of oppression led them to gather too much and hoard it. And of course the manna spoiled and was no good for anyone. Perhaps their lack of trust in God is what led God to include in our basic covenant with him that we are not to covet. And while most of us truly believe we follow the Ten Commandments, when we are honest with ourselves, we may realize that we check off the first nine and then stop short.

After all, "Thou shalt not covet" sounds so foreign. Such antiquated language. And as church goes, it is just another one of the other "thou shalt nots" that we would never even consider. But what about this definition. Covet: A severe craving for the possessions or life circumstances of others. You see, it's the "life circumstances" that gets me every time.

Oh, I don't want your husband – keeping up with my own is enough of a challenge. I don't want your car – I love my 12 year old Toyota with 220,000 miles on it – she drives like a dream. I don't want your crops. I wouldn't know where to store them either. But I really would love to have your naturally curly hair, your long legs, your mind that understands algebra or your

ability to grow beautiful flowers. So if the truth be told, we are all guilty of wanting what we cannot have and more likely do not need.

In fact, this passage is most often used during the Stewardship season, where preachers stand in the pulpit and tell you what you already know. God gives us everything we have. As God's children we are called to share. We are REQUIRED to give only 10% but sharing in a way that makes the kingdom of God more of a reality is really the way we SHOULD be giving. And because of this, I considered putting this parable off until October when we plan the 2018 budget.

But did you notice that I said, "AT FIRST GLANCE" this is a parable about greed? Because when I dug deeper, the Holy Spirit taught me something completely different and probably more relevant. I believe this is a parable that teaches us about the importance of relationships. Let's look at the man in the parable more closely.

Jesus says that when the wealthy landowner starts to work through his dilemma, he *thought* to himself, "What should I do with all my crops – I have no place to store them." Then he *says* to himself, "I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones." Do you notice who he has his discussion with. HIMSELF.

Now everyone in this room has talked to yourself and most likely answered yourself too. But this is a really weighty problem. Yet, the man has only himself to go to. He has no sons who help him work the land, no friends that he trusts enough to get advice from. He doesn't know his neighbor well enough to see if he had a bumper crop too. Not even a wife to complain to about the extra work and expense that come with this blessing. There is NO ONE that he can confide in, talk things over with, or even brag to about his wealth. He has only himself.

And what makes his story even sadder is the next line in the parable. Jesus tells the crowd that the man says, "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry'." This makes it clear that the man is not just talking about his physical needs, but his emotional ones too. By addressing his own soul, it is clear that the man believes that all of his needs can be met within himself. And therefore, not only is he missing out on human relationship, but he does not even have a relationship with God.

When I was a young woman, just learning to be who I am and trying to figure out why God made me, I became very enmeshed in the life of the church. Looking back, I realize it was God's way of using my bargaining instead of going to Seminary to prepare me for the ministry, because ultimately, I think I served on every committee that existed.

One morning at the Coordinating Team of the Presbyterian Women, where I was of course, the Moderator, a friend of mine read a devotion that was written in the form of a conversation between a good Christian lady and Jesus at the door of Heaven. The church lady got to Heaven ready to receive her wings and halo and Jesus said, "I'm so sorry but you can't come in because I don't know you."

Of course, the woman was so taken aback. She pled her case. "But Jesus, I am the one who visited all those sick people in the hospital when we had no preacher. And I am the one who baked all the cookies for the Youth gatherings and I was a Circle Leader six years in a row. And don't you remember how I played in the Handbell Choir and directed Vacation Bible School and?" and on and on she went until Jesus interrupted and said, "Oh yes, I remember you, and I know who you ARE but I don't know YOU."

Friends, I have never forgotten that story. And the man in the parable would have benefited greatly from it. Because over the years, I have remembered many times that it is one

matter to do things for the Lord, even to work for the Lord. But it is another thing entirely to spend TIME with the Lord. Just being in God's presence and knowing God intimately.

And perhaps, that is the real meaning of the parable. Because God interrupted the man as he spoke to his own soul by saying, "YOU FOOL"! In Greek, God actually says, "You have no mind, spirit or emotions." In other words, God tells the man that he has nothing. Nothing at all but his stuff. He plans alone, builds alone, indulges alone and will die alone.

We are not told the questioner's response to the parable and I am sure this is for a reason. Jesus leaves the story open ended – with a question for all of us. So while the parable certainly contains a lesson about greed, perhaps the better lesson is this. Our lives are not our own. Everything we have – even our souls – are on loan from God. And it is up to each of us to determine what we will do with them while we have them. Friends, life is a gift from God. And the question the parable asks of each of us is: How are you using yours? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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