

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John Swanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘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.’ But 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?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.”

SERMON

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is a certain bit of irony in me preaching on this particular passage in Luke - especially this particular week. I say that because during this past week, I have not only been wrestling with what I should say about the parable of the rich fool - the man with too much stuff - I have also been wrestling with a lot of big plastic tubs. Those tubs are at my home and they are filled with children’s clothes that we are in the midst of going through in an effort to have a garage sale in a few weeks.

Currently, our home is a maze of tubs, piles of cast off clothes and old “babyish” toys. As I have sat in my living room this week, gazing upon all our stuff we have stored up for ourselves, I have found myself feeling ashamed and guilty - maybe even hypocritical.

It certainly seems a bit hypocritical for me to be standing up here talking about the sin of having too much stuff given the fact that I have too much stuff. Hypocritical or not, I can at least say this much - I am preaching on a subject that I know and understand very well.

This story that we read today from Luke’s Gospel is a tricky one. Jesus has been teaching to a large crowd. In the midst of this crowd comes a man who asks Jesus to help him settle an inheritance issue that he is dealing with. His elder brother was given twice the share of the inheritance - which was the standard practice at the time - but the younger brother (after listening to Jesus talk about justice, mercy and grace) asked Jesus to help him get a bigger piece of the family pie.

We might agree that this man deserves an equal share in his family’s money, but Jesus sees the danger in his

request. Jesus has no desire to get involved in an argument about who should control this piece of land and who should have this pile of stuff, because Jesus knew, just like we know, there is never an end to fights about possessions.

Jesus’ response to this man’s question moves the issue from a private matter of a family dispute into a broader, public context. Jesus puts aside the question of who will have what portion of the family land and moves to the root issue - greed and the horrible way human life tends to be judged and valued according to the number of possessions one has.

We typically do not give titles to our sermons here at Bethel. I, for one, am glad we do not because that would force me to have a really good plan of what I am going to preach on sooner than I currently do. And I would then be tied to that theme even if my thoughts about the sermon changed after I had picked a title. But today I have a title for my sermon - “Take on a proper focus.”

This passage does more than just warn us to avoid collecting a lot of stuff. In a broader sense, it is a warning to avoid all things that pull us away from God - to avoid all things that make us lose our proper focus.

I read in the most recent Christian Century a story about a pastor who served in a small church in Chicago. The church almost split this past winter over the color of the carpet in the ladies’ parlor. That may sound crazy, but listen on.

On the night of the vote, the two opposing sides - the Maroon Camp and the Forest Green Camp - would not even speak to one another. The moderator at the meeting had to call for a secret ballot - the first in 75 years - because the animosity was so strong between the two groups.

While they were voting in this small church in Chicago, thousands of Haitians were leaving their makeshift homes to wade through rubble in order to hold an open-air worship service and conduct a national day of mourning after the January 12 earthquake that devastated that small country. These people who gathered lifted up their hands and their voices to remember the thousands of people buried in mass graves without a funeral, without flowers, without anyone sharing scripture’s proclamation of resurrection for the body and newness of life.

The pastor of that small church in Chicago knew that that service was taking place in Haiti and had intended to lift up their plight as part of worship on the day of the carpet vote. With all the congregational drama, however, she had forgotten to pray for her brothers and sisters in Haiti. Afterwards, she said she was angry with herself and her people. While completely focusing on the carpet, they did nothing to remember, nothing to soothe the pain or to help put back together the brokenness of the world.

“Take on a proper focus.”

The story that Jesus tells of the rich fool is interesting, because in many ways this man does some things that many of us would consider wise and prudent. This man has saved, has not spent frivolously and has used the land entrusted to him wisely. Why then, does God call him a fool?

The answer to that question lies in the words of the rich fool. Let's read them again, beginning with the 17th verse:

“And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘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.’”

Only one voice is heard in these verses, his own, and there is only one voice that this man is willing to listen to, again, his own. The rhetoric of these verses intentionally highlights this: the man thinks to himself, he speaks to himself. The language emphasizes his sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy. He is rich, and his wealth means he needs no one but himself.

I was listening to a talk radio personality recently and he stated with great pride that he never took a handout, never received any assistance, never experienced any form of undeserved generosity from anyone - he was, in his terms, a self made man. He went on to say that it was because of that - his own hard work - that he was where he is today. Then the calls began pouring in.

One person after another called in to agree with this man and then they boldly stated that they too, had never gotten anything from anyone. Finally, a caller went even further. He said, “I never was given a handout - never! I worked for everything I got! If I had to, why shouldn't everyone else! Make 'em work for everything!” And he hung up. “Amen,” declared the radio host, thrilled to hear such support.

I couldn't stomach an more and I turned to another station. Those words really bothered me. They bothered me, not because philosophically I disagree with what he had to say - which I do, but because I know people who have gotten handouts - who did not deserve the good that they got, at least not any more than anyone else.

One of those people that got a handout that did not deserve it was my Dad. He and his younger brother George, were placed in a children's home sometime in the late 1930's, when my Dad was in his mid teens. Their parents had died and, after spending some time with aunts and uncles, they finally ended up in a Swedish Lutheran Children's Home in New Lenox, Illinois. There, they received an education, food, shelter, clothing and a tremendous amount of love and concern.

Handout story number two. Unlike my Dad, who served in the Navy during World War II and the Korean War, his brother did not. Uncle George had some minor health issues that prevented him from serving. Consequently, he did not have the opportunity to take

advantage of the GI Bill - so Uncle George had no way to pay for college. However, a family who knew my Dad and Uncle George because they attended the same church that the children's home brought all the kids to, heard of my uncle's plight and offered to pay for his entire college tuition, no strings attached.

Handout story number three. I attended seminary for four years. Periodically I would need to go to the business office in the seminary for questions about tuition, housing and things like that. Each time I would go to the business office, I would make sure that my tuition was paid. I did this, because I never really knew what my status was at seminary with regards to paying my tuition. My tuition was always paid - don't get me wrong - but it was never once paid by me. To this day I do not know who paid it, but it was given to me - purely as a gift from someone I will never know.

What I find to be interesting in regards to the handout stories that we hear about and some of us get very angry over, is that each has a story behind them. Sometimes the stories are filled with dishonesty, laziness, greed and more and when we hear those kind of stories we have a right to get angry. Far more often times, however, the stories are filled with generosity, love, hope and grace. They are stories about one person realizing that they have plenty and instead of doing the easy thing and turning inward, that person dares to look outward and in so doing, allows great things to happen.

The rich man in the parable came up with a perfectly logical solution to his problem of having too much stuff. He decided to create more space - to build a bigger barn - and in so doing, the rich man turned inward and showed just how trapped he was in this sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy. There was no thought about the existence of another world outside the world of his own possessions and of his own barns. The rich man's world was defined by the boundaries of “his” land and “his” surplus. Nothing and no one else entered into his range of vision, just as no other voices were invited to participate in his conversation. There was neither room nor need for anyone else.

This closed world was invaded by the voice of God in verse 20, and with one word, “Fool,” God brought the rich man's world toppling down. The foolishness of this man, was not in working hard, saving and being productive. What made this man foolish was the way he viewed his life - as if he needed no one else, including God.

Theologian Peter Rhea Jones states that the approach the rich fool took in his life could be termed Practical Atheism. Jones says that the rich fool might protest that he has always believed in God, but when it comes to managing his life, dealing with possessions and planning for the future, he lives as though there were no God. The parable, therefore, probes our basic commitments. What difference should our faith in God make in the practical matters of life.

“Take on a proper focus.” How do we do that? Show compassion. Pray regularly. Worry less. Serve more. Give joyfully. And finally, love all. Amen. © 2010