

Sermon – July 31, 2022

“Fool!”

Text: Luke 12:13-21

Let us pray: O God, awaken us to the challenges of your word. Open our eyes to the subtle meaning of this parable, that we might see our lives in your divine light. Remind us that you are the source of our hope and the giver of all that is good. In Jesus' name'. Amen.

I've been debating back and forth these past few days how to preach this text, especially as we close the month of July and welcome August. Should I preach on money matters or stewardship? Should I talk about death and dying? Should I bring the word “greed” to life? Or perhaps set aside the theology part and focus more on what most people define as the brighter side of life – to eat, drink and be merry? What about talking about folly and foolishness for a start? Difficult texts like this parable may be needed to break through the walls of self-sufficiency and be awakened to God's vision of healing and transformation.

The late stand-up comedian George Carlin had a reputation for satiric performances using humor, exaggeration, and mockery. In one monologue, Carlin depicts the obsessive accumulation of material things in our modern world: *“You got your stuff with you? I’ll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses. . . . Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff. That’s what life is all about, tryin’ to find a place for your stuff! That’s all your house is; a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody’s got his own little pile of stuff.”* Like Carlin’s monologue, today’s parable portrays a similar situation of “stuff accumulation.”

It all started when someone in the crowd approached Jesus with a question to settle a dispute with his brother about family inheritance. Jesus did not respond to this person's problem. In fact, Jesus responded with a bit of sarcasm: “my friend, I am not your judge nor an arbitrator!” as if telling the man that it was not Jesus’ business to meddle in the man’s personal affairs. Turning to the crowd, Jesus tells them the parable of the rich fool. This parable is uniquely Lukan in its origin although there are some similar stories about treasures and riches

found in Matthew and Mark. Luke, as we all know, has a big heart for the poor, the marginalized and the have-nots. In this parable, however, Luke portrays Jesus as having no problem with riches or treasures or materialism as such, only with what people do with them; clinging to them as if it would secure their souls forever – accumulating wealth for themselves without sharing what they have with others. Jesus warns the crowd: “Watch out! Take care! Beware! Stay away from greed. Stop accumulating so much stuff. Focus on having a rich relationship with God. The sum of your life is not measured by how much riches you have.” Surely, this parable illustrates the futility of wanting more, which, in fact, leads to having nothing in the end.

The rich farmer, as the parable declares, has a land that produces abundant crops. Harvest after harvest, year after year, his fortune escalates like crazy. One night after having a sumptuous dinner, he went outside to have a good look at his vast land. Then he became anxious. His anxiety stems from having small barns to store his overflowing produce. With no intention of sharing his fortune with others, he said to himself, “what should I do? I have no place to store my crops? My barns are too small.” Then he came up with this grandiose idea: “barn expansion project! Why not? I have the money to spend and I want larger barns to keep all of my crops. Then I will sit back and enjoy my riches.”

Sometimes we read this parable, assuming that the farmer was a crook or that he was insatiably greedy, or one who lives with the philosophy that “enough is never enough”. But Jesus doesn’t say any of these things. Jesus doesn’t rebuke the farmer as if he is hoarding ill-gotten riches. It seems to me that the farmer is a hard-working, efficient, decent guy whose fortune is unstoppable. Like many of us, the farmer is good at resource management; he was ambitious and he knows his business well. All that is good. But then, given all his management skills and his over the top riches, he begins to imagine himself managing his own life, even his own future. The man’s problem is not that he practices dishonest business, or that he had a voracious appetite for material possessions. Many who hear this parable, especially in a first world context, may wonder: Why is the rich farmer called a fool?

Well, first of all, I think this farmer needs to take a course in Conversation 101. He has to talk with people more often. Why, he's talking only to himself, and he's pretty much talking only about himself. That's pretty scary. He reminds me of Beyonce's song called "*Me, Myself and I*". Beyonce belts out: "*Me myself and I - That's all I got in the end; That's what I found out - And there ain't no need to cry; I took a vow that from now on - I'm gonna be my own best friend.*" This could be the theme song of the farmer. In the parable, we do not even see or hear other human beings in the picture. Every line that this farmer speaks is spoken to himself, and everything he says refers to himself: my grain, my crops, my soul, my goods, my barns. Me, myself and I!

To continue with his internal dialogue, the farmer says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." Why not? Doesn't this man deserve R&R (rest and relaxation) in celebration of his extreme fortune? He worked hard for it, so what's wrong with that? Living comfortably is a good thing, but the farmer forgot one thing. It is not his job to assure his soul about the shape of his future, especially if he is living only for himself. There are poor people around him that need food. There are homeless people who need shelter. There are children who have no proper health care. The farmer does not even practice the meaning of good stewardship – giving thanks to God, and to care for others and the whole of creation, He was so focused on himself that he completely forgot what the Psalmist declares: "The earth is God's and all its bounty!" He forgot about loving one's neighbours and caring for the orphans, the widows, the poor or any of those who barely survive due to limited access of resources. I think that is the problem!

God calls him a fool! "You fool!" This is a strong word – a put down for sure! One that is hurled towards someone whom all good reasoning had vanished. The farmer's folly is not that he had built bigger barns or because he was rich. He is a fool because he believes that his abundant resources will safeguard his future without acknowledging God's presence in his life. God responds to him with an unwarranted pronouncement: "Alright foolish man, your soul has been corrupted by your bank account. It's time for you to say goodbye to this world – adios to your barns and goods! And the things you have stored, whose will they be?" It is a question without an answer in the parable. As far as we know, he doesn't have anyone to whom to leave his goods. He may be the best farmer, the greatest long-range resource manager, the most

dedicated planner in the world, and still, if he does not know that he could be dead tomorrow, he is a fool.

It is not that God doesn't want us to save for retirement or future needs. It is not that God doesn't want us to "eat, drink, and be merry" and enjoy the gifts of life. This parable speaks about priorities. It is about who is truly in our lives. It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts that God has given us. It is about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: toward ourselves and our selfish desires, or toward God and our neighbour, toward God's call to bless and heal the world.

So what do we do with this text? How do we make this parable become relevant in our living? Three important things come to mind:

First – The rich man's land has produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest the bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. We must remind ourselves that life is a gift from God who calls us to be in relationship with one another and the whole of creation. For those of us who still believe in the divine providence, we should acknowledge that all blessings and abundant grace comes from God, the Great Provider.

Second – Jesus exposes one inconvenient truth in this parable: to live only for oneself had communal implications. If one becomes richer and richer, it meant that others become poorer and poorer. A life shared with others is a life well lived. To be rich toward God is to open one's hands and hearts to advance God's agenda of love, care, justice and compassion in the world, especially to those who lack resources to provide for themselves. We should not live only for ourselves. We must share what we have and live in community.

Third – we must remind ourselves that we are mortal beings. Death is a fact of life. Sooner or later, we will be separated from all of the riches we accumulated. We cannot take this wealth with us. In God's rule, they will not go to waste if you spend time sharing your goods with others. Our time, our talents, our riches – they are just what God needs to answer our

neighbour's prayer for daily bread or a roof over their heads, for healing brokenness, for peace to reign.

Dear friends, it's time we take an inventory of the kind of relationship we have with God, with others, with ourselves and with the whole of creation. How do we treat others? How much do we love? How radical is our hospitality? What do we advocate for? Who and what are important to us? Are we rich toward God? Leave the excessive barns to the fool and commit to being better people by sharing than storing and hoarding. We are blessed so that we might be a blessing; loved so that we may love others; healed so we may heal the hurting world. Until we make the right connections between God our lives, until we realize there are people around us longing for our presence and acts of justice and love, if we take this parable to heart, the way we live our lives will never be the same again. Thanks be to God. Amen.