

SERMON- Proper 13 (C)
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Good Shepherd (Burke)
August 4, 2019

Hosea 11:1-11 Psalm 107:1-9, 43 Colossians 3:1-11 **Luke 12:13-21**

OPENER:

There, of course, is the expression: “You can’t take it with you.”

I had not heard this one, a saying in Arab culture: “There are no pockets in the (burial) shroud.”¹

I am more familiar with this one: the George Strait song with the line: “I ain’t ever seen a hearse with a luggage rack.”

There’s John Ruskin recounting the story “(of the) wreck of a Californian ship, (where) one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with two hundred pounds of gold in it, with which he was found afterward at the bottom. (Rustin continues) Now, as he was sinking- had he the gold? or the gold him?”²

And there is what happens at the end of *Indiana Jones: The Last Crusade* when Harrison Ford’s character reaches for the Holy Grail, even as the walls are crumbling around him. His father rescues him by saying “Let it go.” Let the pursuit of riches, of fame, of success go, for what use are they in the end?

These are all good pieces of advice, traditional sapiential wisdom of ancient philosophy, of Biblical Scripture, and of today. Death does not respect your 401k, your 1099, or the size of your barns.

TEXT

I am not sure *though* if Jesus, with our parable, is focusing on that specific point. His primary focus is not what’s beyond this world or salvation or life thereafter.

Instead, I think he is talking about something closer to home in this story about the rich farmer.

¹ R. Wayne Stacy “Luke 12:13-21: The Parable of the Rich Fool.” *Review and Expositor* (94) 1997: 287.

² John Ruskin. 1860 *Unto this Last*, (quoted as the epigraph to Michael Lewis’ *Moneyball* [2005].)

He's talking about Life.
We think he is talking about death.
But I think Jesus is talking about life.

The word "death"—or anything to do with dying—is not really mentioned in the parable, while the word "life" appears twice.

And, tellingly for the point of view of the human character, the 1st person pronoun: "I, my, me, mine" shows up 11 times in this short passage. That's because the farmer is utterly alone with his barns, He's what we might call "**in**dependently wealthy" but he is utterly **de**pendent on his possessions.³ He resorts to the Epicurean cliché of "eat drink and be merry" but not even realizing that he is by himself, that it would be a very lonely party.

He does not own the stuff, the stuff owns him. He's a 1st century Scrooge, trying to rationalize his capital improvements.

In another turn of phrase, he has amassed what we might call "securities" but they don't make him particularly secure.⁴

This is known as the Parable of the Rich Fool, a good name, because the man does not seem evil or wicked, just simply badly mistaken.

The problem for the man is not an impending death and accompanying judgement, but a life full of worry and anxiety about the size of his barns. He treats the bumper crop as a dilemma rather than a blessing. His big problem is: where do I keep all my money?

SHIFT

Then God shows up, as God does. God calls him a fool because he, and all of us, need reminding that human beings don't own, or have complete control over our lives, we are only stewards of them. The whole thing was never really "his." God wants the farmer to know that his life is merely a loan where God had lent him these generous gifts, and he refused to share.

³ Stacy, 288.

⁴ Mary C. Orr, "Luke 12:13-23." *Interpretation* (July 2002): 316

MONEY:

But, again, this is not a parable about guilt. It's a parable about life and freedom. It's about relationships or the lack thereof, and it's about what we do with the gifts that we have been given.

Now it would be easier if Jesus did not care at all about the size or amount of our barns, our possessions, if the Bible said nothing about money. It would be easier if the Prosperity Gospel were true, that we were indeed judged by our belongings. Or it would be at least somewhat easier if we were just supposed to liquidate all of it, if money were inherently evil.

But it's tougher on both sides: Jesus didn't seem particularly enamored with his cousin (John the Baptist's) desire to live off the land in poverty and he certainly did not have much sympathy or affection for the rich and affluent of his time.

Instead we are left with the reality of living in the world, and the difficult task of knowing how to use our God-given gifts, and the challenge of discerning how to use them as far as money is concerned.

That word discernment—always tricky—particularly when you put words like “careful” and “prayerful” in front of them. It means that we have to walk our spiritual journey using the gifts that God has given us, hoping to understand where and how to use our treasure, when to build our barns, when to tear them down.

BENEDICTION:

For help, I would like to turn to a blessing that sometimes is used in the Episcopal Church. It's so beautiful that I hesitate to use it in a sermon, so as not to ruin it.

But I think this blessing speaks to this dilemma about what we do with our treasure, about who it belongs to. It calls our attention to the “urgency of now,” the immediacy of living this life in this world. The blessing was composed by the famous 20th century preacher and pastor, William Sloane Coffin.

Perhaps you can recall hearing it:

May God give you Grace never to sell yourself short!

Grace to risk something big for something good!

Grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but Love!

I wonder if Coffin had this passage, the parable of the Rich Fool, in mind when he came up with his famous benediction. Did you catch the the language of finance? (“sell yourself short” + “risk something big.”) There’s the idea of a big and small. There is the notion that our inheritances, the way we manage our money, should look like the inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

It continues:

*So, may God take your minds
and think through them;
may God take your lips
and speak through them;
may God take your hearts
and set them on fire.*

CONCLUSION:

These are powerful words.

One might add to them:

“May God take our *wallets* and work through them,
our contributions to this church,
our money spent everywhere, the barns that we raise,
and set them at work building up the Kingdom of God.”

Because, in reality, we were made by God, for God; not by God, for ourselves.⁵

Barbara Brown Taylor says it like this: “Get yourself a purpose as soon as you can—one that helps God mend the world, and mends you while you are it—maybe even one that costs you more than a laptop or a Lincoln Town Car...”⁶

“Until then, if you have to be greedy, then be greedy for love. Be greedy for justice, and wisdom, and significance. That way, when it comes to show God what is in your treasure chest, there won’t be any doubt in either of your minds that you are rich, rich, rich.”⁷

AMEN

⁵ Stacy 289.

⁶ “Treasure Hunt: Luke 12:13-21.” *Review and Expositor*, 99, (Winter 2002): 103.

⁷ *Ibid*, 104.