

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Bigger Barns”

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Luke 12:13-21

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’¹⁴ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’¹⁵ 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.’¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly.¹⁷ And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?”¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”²⁰ 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?”²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

The ancient Stoic philosopher Seneca once said, “If what you have seems insufficient to you, then though you possess the world, you will yet be miserable.” One of my favorite philosophers, deadpan comedian Steven Wright once said, “You can’t have everything. Where would you put it?”

Lawrence Wood, a United Methodist minister in northern Michigan, describes an estate sale for two members of his church that had recently passed away. Ed and Edna’s place was pretty typical. The house’s cupboards, bureaus, cabinets, attic and spare bedroom were full of clutter, collectibles and books and magazines that defined Edna and just couldn’t be thrown away. A lot of the space was taken up by Edna’s special interest, for which she was noted- her Hummel figurines. Ed had filled the pole barn behind the house with old tires, a trailer, parts from junk cars, dozens of tools gathering rust, and hundreds of coffee cans filled with nuts and bolts. Absent the owners, all of the stuff was carried to the green lawn in front of the barn. Ed and Edna’s children and all of the closest friends thought, “My goodness, there is a lot of stuff here. What a lot of junk!” The auction agent didn’t want to haul any of it away so he priced everything low. “Everything must go!” the sign said over the children’s clothes, dating back to the seventies and amazingly preserved in tissue by Edna for her grandchildren. She could have never imagined whose hands would now buy them. With a little encouragement, the old bicycles sold for a modest price, so did Ed’s band saw and drill press, and even Edna’s once-prized lamp that now looked hideous. When the auctioneer came to Edna’s collection of 400 Hummels, eyes rolled and knowing smiles broke out. But no one bid. The auctioneer looked at the auction agent. The agent

looked at Edna's daughter. It seemed that a lifetime's hobby and person's identity had come to this. These Hummels- whose would they be?

We used to have a saying attached to our refrigerator door that said, "Live so that the preacher won't have to lie at your funeral." I found a different goal for life presented in my sermon research this week. Someone said, "Live so that your survivors will be not embarrassed when they have to clean out your home and basements and attics and closets after you die."

A man in a crowd approached Jesus with for an opinion that he hoped would allow him to receive his proper inheritance. Instead of offering a ruling, Jesus issues a warning about greed and tells a parable about a rich farmer. The farmer's fields it seems, have had a good year and there is an abundance of crops. Concerned about what might happen in the future, the farmer prepares for that day by tearing down his barns and building bigger ones in which to store his more than adequate harvest. He believes such action will lead to a comfortable and secure future. He will be able to sleep at night knowing that tomorrow is provided for. "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" Jesus then warns that the rich farmer's concern for security and accumulation of wealth will lead him nowhere. When your life is demanded of you, it doesn't matter how much stuff you have. Some day we all must go. It is better to be concerned about your relationship with God. It is better to secure our soul than it is our financial future.

It is important to note that unlike some other parables of Jesus, there is no wrongdoing going on here. There is no stealing, no padding of accounts, and no taking advantage of the vineyard workers. On the surface the rich farmer seems to be preparing for his "retirement" much as any of us do. He looked forward to the time when he could stop his labors and relax- eat, drink, and be merry. His goals resonate with our own as we reflect upon our pension plans, our IRAs, and our 401Ks during these difficult economic times.

Yet Jesus says that he is a fool! His folly isn't that he has built bigger barns. He is a farmer and farmers need storage space. He is a fool because he believes that his ample goods will safeguard his future. He believes that he can safely and successfully manage all that might come his way. He considers no one but himself as he considers the problem of his expanding wealth. His monologue of deliberation is filled with "I" statements. "What should I do for I have no place to store my crops?" "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and I will build larger ones and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And then I will say to my soul, 'Soul you can now relax.'" He does not consult with anyone. He does not consider sharing of his wealth. He does not consider anyone else in need. His vision extends only to himself and his personal retirement fund. He may be living the good life but he has missed what Jesus would call "the blessed life." The rich farmer's future plan yields insecurity and anxiety in the present while missing the very presence of God in the blessings of the seed and the harvest that yielded his bounty.

I had a meaningful conversation with my father last Sunday. We spoke about parenting. I was telling him about the frustrations of planning to meet the needs of my daughters and trying to keep them happy. I spoke of cars and insurance and gasoline, of trips to France and to New York City, of tuition payments and clothes and shoes. He listened and then told me that I was being a better father than he ever was. I laughed at

him and asked him why he would even suggest that. He said, "None of those things were an option for me to offer you and your brother and sister. I could not provide it so I did not have to worry about it. You have to make decisions about things that were beyond my ability to consider." And once again my father was right. Affluence and comfort are meant to be blessings yet for many of our hours they have become sources of anxiety and worry and discomfort. It is as Emerson once said, "Things are in the saddle and they ride mankind."

Jesus taught that finding a treasure is fine. It is not a sin to be rich in things. However we all must realize that our accumulation of stuff and our obsession with control of material things tends to lead us to neglect our relationship with God. We begin to identify ourselves with what we own. We begin to think we can control our future through adequate preparation. We began to believe that we can manage everything through having enough of what we need. What we fail to understand is that it is far more important to be rich in God. When our life is demanded of us, it doesn't matter how much stuff we have. It is God's good pleasure to give us what we need for each day. It is God's good pleasure to secure our souls. When we comprehend what God's gifts in life truly are, then the harvest can become what it truly was meant to be- not a possession to hoard but the blessings by which the Creator cares for creation.

In his book *Jacob the Baker*, Noah ben Shea tells the story of the local wise man Jacob. One day he was visited by a very old woman, who rolled her hands together nervously, looking over her shoulder as if those around her might be listening. She moved closer to Jacob and whispered, "Listen young man. I want to ask you something. I heard you talk about dying and I am going to die soon. I have a great deal of money. If you are so smart, why not tell me now I can take it with me?" The old woman then released a wicked little gurgle of greed. Jacob just looked at her. The woman asked again, this time her voice more raspy with impatience, "Well? Well? What can be carried to the other side?" Her greed excited she shouted out, "How? How?" Jacob grew calmer. "In your memory," he answered. The woman was dumbstruck at this suggestion. "In my memory? Why, memory can't carry wealth!" Jacob's focus caught the woman's eye and he said, "That is because you have already forgotten what is of value."

Storing up our treasures is fine, as far as those treasures may carry us. But our real value as people of God is what we risk living our faith, finding our treasure in God. We can live more simply, not worrying about possessing something or preserving it or protecting it. We can enjoy the harvest and share it with others, knowing that it is not really ours to keep. We can give thanks for the signs of a blessed life around us, recognizing the presence of God in that which we receive. We are to love God and to love one another. We are to offer the gifts of forgiveness, generosity, gentleness, and hospitality- just as we have received these same gifts from our gracious Creator.

Jesus reminds us of the folly of building bigger barns and building the meaning of our life upon that which we possess. We are to seek the alternative, building life upon our richness in God.

