



“Misplaced Wealth”

Pastor Jan Shannon

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Scripture:

Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

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 toward God.”

Sermon:

My dad wanted to be a rich man... Dad left college up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, so the story goes, after one year, due to some illness; scarlet fever or meningitis, I think. Anyway, the cure back in those days, the early 1920’s, was to take a year off and rest. So dad decided that since he couldn’t continue at college, he might as well come down to America and see California, so he did.

Dad wanted to be rich, and he had the energy and charismatic personality of an entrepreneur, so he started his own business, building or selling packing crates for the

orange groves, so the story goes, and made a fortune. Made a million, actually. Or a couple. Leaving that business behind at some point, he began another business making and selling industrial-strength chemicals. Cleansers, they were, and he sold them to companies like Heinz Ketchup and Planter's Peanuts to clean the huge vats.

My mom told me some stories about my dad, like the time one Saturday, when Dad suggested they go for a drive, just for fun, you understand, and ended up at the Planter's factory. The plant foreman came out onto the loading dock and told my dad, "Don't you come in here, Kelly, (they called my dad Kelly even though his name was Clive) I don't need any of your products today!" Dad replied that he 'just wanted to talk' that he and the missus were 'just out for a drive' (some 30-40 miles from their house). Dad talked his way into the plant, and when he came out the foreman had an order for more of dad's products in his hand. Dad could sell ice cream to Eskimos.

Dad wanted to be rich. He wanted his children to go to private schools, and they all did, except me. He wanted to have 12 kids, and he almost did...my mom was pregnant 11 times. Dad wanted to know famous people, to eat at the best restaurants, to live in a big house in a fancy neighborhood, and he did. He did all those things.

We went to school with Bing Crosby's second family, lived in Hillsborough, CA, one of the most expensive zip codes in America, and dad seemed to have achieved his goals. And then he died.

When dad was only 60 years old, and I was only 10, he died. He had a bad heart, it turned out, possibly from that bout of illness when he was in college. It was hard enough to lose my dad, the sole bread winner for our family, but it turns out that his business hadn't been doing well for a while and dad had cashed in his life insurance to keep it afloat. So at 55, my mom, with 5 children from ages 20 to 10, one in college, had to go back to work after being out of the workforce for 30 years. We had to sell our house in Hillsborough at a loss just to get out from under it, and a friend of my dad's bought his business at a loss, too, to

save my mom from bankruptcy. We moved about every 18 months after that, into smaller and smaller spaces; from houses to townhouses to apartments. Even though she worked a full-time job, the bills just kept piling up. By the time I was 12, I knew how to lie to creditors and tell them my mom wasn't at home.

Why am I telling you this story? Because our text for today isn't just a bible story; it's a human story. It is the very real, and all too frequent, story of humankind's quest for riches, and our unfailing lack of appreciation for reality.

You see, what makes the rich man a fool isn't his money. No. What makes him a fool is his blindness to reality. His refusal to acknowledge his mortality.

In not acknowledging his own mortality, the rich man in our story fails to acknowledge the God who made him; and also fails to care for his neighbor. These two bookends of a sanctified life are set aside in favor of the kind of selfishness that also fails to do any good for oneself.

If you read this story carefully you will notice that the rich man never thanks God for his wonderful harvest. The rich man ignores the hand of God in his good fortune, and focuses only on the benefit to himself, and actually even sees his plentiful harvest of something of a dilemma, since he says he has nowhere to store his crops. His barns are already full, but instead of selling the crops and thereby having money from which to make his tithe to God, or giving the extra grain to the poor, the rich man knocks down what were probably perfectly good barns in order to build larger ones to hold all the grain. He neither thanks God nor helps his neighbor. Talk about a lose-lose situation.

“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But sadly, that's not what happens. “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 toward God.”

What does it mean to be rich toward God? The rich man in the parable has forgotten both his relationship with God and his relationship with his neighbors. He is rich in earthly things, but not rich toward God. When we acknowledge our humanity, our frailty, our need for wisdom and grace and forgiveness from God, we also are able to acknowledge our common lot, with everyone else on the planet. Without the former, it is difficult to find the latter. In not being rich toward God, man in the story is actually revealed as being quite poor. Poor in his relationship with God and poor in relation to his neighbor. The selfishness of the rich fool caused him to misplace his wealth, for he placed his wealth in barns rather than in relationships.

While it may seem that the story today focuses on our life as individuals, there is a strong message for our communal life. Every Christian is called to maintain a life rich toward God. The Apostle Paul tells us in the third chapter of Colossians, “Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, think about the things above and not things on earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” When we realize that there is more to this life than we can see, we realize that storing all our wealth – our talents and our treasure – just for ourselves and our use here on earth, it is misplaced. In order for our wealth to be useful, we need to acknowledge our need for God and for each other.

If we really mean that “thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” prayer that we pray every week, we will each need to use a portion of our time and talents in order to get God’s work done. When we do that work together, a lot more work gets done. Amen.

Question for group discussion: What does it mean for us, Westminster CUCC, to be a people who are “rich toward God”?