

Rich Toward God?

Last week when we read Jesus' strong words to the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 11, I drew a connection between the religion of the Pharisees and what I called "middle-class Christianity." This isn't something that I just pulled out of midair. I pointed out at the time that, in their way, the Pharisees actually had a lot in common with middle class people today. This morning, I'd like to begin by pushing this one step further to suggest that the author of the gospel of Luke was a middle- to upper-class person himself, and that he had the middle-class Christians of his community in mind as he wrote his history of Jesus and the beginnings of the church.

My reasons for this are threefold. The first is historical. Christians have always connected the third gospel with the person Paul calls "Luke, the beloved physician" in his letter to the Colossians. Being a physician in that world wouldn't have made Luke rich, and we should be careful not to confuse him with a modern man of science—but it would have made him better-off and better-educated than most people in his day. The second reason we could call "literary." Scholars have recognized that in many ways, Luke modeled his writings on the style of the Greek historians of his time. And this, of course, suggests that Luke moved in educated and well-to-do circles. And thirdly,

Luke's subject-matter touches on middle class themes—especially the tension that money and material possessions create in the life of discipleship.

In this section of chapter 12, Jesus speaks to both sides of this tension—first to the problem of greed that comes from having too much, and then to the problem of anxiety that comes with having too little. As this is exactly the tension of the middle class life—we are prone to the pitfalls that come with having more than the basics, but still anxious that we may not have enough. As my work on this sermon progressed over the past few days, I discovered that we're only going to be able to get the first half of this today—so we'll just call this message part one of two.

We begin today with a man who calls out to Jesus from the crowd, demanding that Jesus take his side in a family dispute over an inheritance. By starting this way, we begin on familiar ground. Disputes over family inheritances seem to be an almost universal experience. Over the years I've had conversations with more people than you might think who've practically gone to war with family members over who gets what. And in the process I've become aware of how much time and money can be spent fighting it out, and how many damaged relationships are left in the wake. Obviously, many of those disputed things have some personal value beyond mere money, or they become proxies for other family issues, but at the end of the day they're still just things.

Jesus doesn't rise to the bait, however. Instead, he sees this as a teachable moment for everyone who's listening in. He says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." And as he likes to do, he tells a little story to illustrate his point.

He tells a story about a rich man—in fact in the Greek the very first words in the story say exactly that. It could be translated, "A rich man had a field that produced a bumper crop." Now if you've been reading Luke from the very beginning you might realize that in Luke "rich" is practically a dirty word—we won't find a positive story about a rich person until chapter 19, and even that one has a few surprises!

So this rich man, this guy who already has way more than he actually needs, suddenly has the huge windfall come his way. And he stops to pose a question to himself. "I have this huge crop. My granaries are overflowing. So what should I do?"

Now, if he had been reading the gospel of Luke he might have already known the answer. Way back in chapter 3, when John the Baptist was preaching about repentance, he told the crowds that they needed to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." And when people asked him what they should do, the first thing he said was, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." (Luke 3:11)

But that thought never seems to enter his mind. Instead, he has a brilliant idea. He will tear down his already ample storage barns and build even bigger ones so he can keep it all for himself. Who knows? He may have even congratulated himself a bit on his ability to create a few short term jobs for barn-builders and field-workers. But he wasn't doing this to provide a hedge against a bad year – like Joseph did all those years ago down in Egypt when he was building granaries left and right. He wasn't investing in economic development to provide long-term benefits for his community. He wasn't even thinking about leaving a legacy for his children to fight over. He was just going to party the rest of his life away!

He might even seem to be remembering his Bible at this point, the book of Ecclesiastes to be precise, where it says:

So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8:15 NIV)

But the writer of Ecclesiastes does some things that this man hasn't done—notice that he acknowledges that toil is still a part of life, and he remembers that God might have something to do with it. This rich man is more like the fool in Psalm 14 who “says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

God speaks to this foolish man. The Lord calls him a fool, and announces, “This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

One of our chief forms of foolishness is to think that we can kick responsibility for our lives down the road. We live as if there will always be time

to do the things we've left undone, or to make up for today's selfishness with tomorrow's generosity. We can't live life in a constant state of paranoia that a sudden death is waiting just around the corner, and we do need to make some long term plans. But living each day to the fullest ought to include more than just eating, drinking, and being merry.

The gospel of Luke has a lot to say to people like this man who had more than enough. Mary proclaims in the passage we read during Advent—the Magnificat: The Lord “has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. (Luke 1:53 RSV) In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” (Luke 6:24) In the end the rich fool's life was a wasted life.

Jesus' tagline at the end of the parable is: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Is it possible to have material wealth, and still be rich toward God? As I've been thinking about this story this week, I've been reminded of a friend named Bob. Bob isn't rich by American standards, but he made enough money working as an engineer and a corporate executive to retire when he was still in what I would guess was his early fifties. He and his wife, Sally, had a beautiful house on the shore of Lake Champlain, and he had his hobbies. They had enough money to eat, drink, and be merry indefinitely.

Bob and Sally did a lot of ordinary retirement things, like spending time with the kids and grandkids, and Bob would follow Sally on European tours with a

choral group she sang with. They enjoyed entertaining people in their home. And Bob did actually build an extra barn.

That barn was really a second garage that served as a shop. For years—and he may still be doing it now—Bob took in dozens of used bicycles every year and refurbished them for the Christmas Bureau, a group like the Goodfellows here in Dixon. He pieced together some more for the Jamaican migrant workers who came every fall for the apple harvest. At this time of year, you would find him in the school auditorium building sets for the community musicals—including a huge staircase for “The Sound of Music” and a fully rolling trolley car for “Meet Me in Saint Louis.” He was an elder and trustee of the Presbyterian church. He was a Sunday morning liturgist; he also waxed floors and scrubbed carpets. He served on presbytery committees, including serving twice as the moderator. For Bob, the wealth accumulated by being fortunate in his professional life became an opportunity – because he is someone who has a heart that is rich toward God.

Greed is constantly on the horizon for middle-class people who want to follow Jesus. For the most part we have enough of the basic things we need. But in a climate that constantly pushes us to consume more, we are constantly tempted to waste God's good gifts for short term gratification. Or we accumulate more than we need – expensive toys or closets overflowing with clothes and shelves bending under the weight of books. It's tempting to fill our lives with these things, and as we do we constantly crave for more. The result

isn't really all that much different than the rich fool in the parable. What sort of treasure are you storing up? Things that you'll forget tomorrow, or will end up being sold off in an estate sale? Or are you rich toward God?

*Rev. David Spaulding
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
February 25, 2018*