

July 31, 2016

"You Are What You Love"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' 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.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" 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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." 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 towards God.'

I am reminded frequently that I grew up in a very different time. Last week, our staff had to explain Pokémon Go to me. I had heard of it, knew it was all the rage—and had no idea what it is or how it works. That's until I learned that our church site is a "gym" and folks are showing up here in the evenings using their smartphones to capture, battle and train Pokémon creatures that appear on their screen. And as a result, we've discussing how to share welcoming hospitality with whole new groups of folks who most assuredly wouldn't otherwise set foot on church grounds.

Clearly, I grew up in a time different in so many ways. We had a black and white TV and a record player and a party-line phone—probably not many people now would even know what that was. That was about it for technology. Mine was a world of rather simple pleasures. We didn't have a lot of stuff, nor aspire to it, really. Boxes were delivered to the door at your birthday and Christmastime, not each time you'd pressed "One-Click Order" using Amazon Prime.

It's different now. We're immersed in a culture of acquisition and consumption. More is more. Because it's all around us, because it's part and parcel of our world, we stop noticing its effects on us. It's like the old story of the two fish. "There are two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Mornin' boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the heck is water?'"

As one commentator on our times has noted: "we need to become aware of our immersions." We need to become aware of the water we're swimming in. And for a spiritual person, for someone seeking to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we need to become aware of immersions that block our grasp of a life lived in love of God and neighbor.

The story we hear today from Luke's Gospel shows us Jesus teaching this very thing. It comes in his encounter with "The Rich Fool" as he is commonly called. Now he lived in a really different time, to be sure, but the mindset that had become his immersion is the same. More is more.

Sometimes this parable is interpreted to be a story about affluence and wealth. But I don't think that's it. It's a story about this guy's immersion in a framework that says: "You are what you have." Forget gratitude. Forget sharing. Forget the common good. 'Mine is mine' describes the water in which this guy is swimming without even being aware. That's what makes him a fool. That's what can make us into fools. And the question to him and to all of us becomes: what must I do to become rich toward God?

This is such an interesting exchange between the Teacher and his interlocutor. On this day, Jesus is teaching his disciples amidst a crowd of thousands. Someone calls out to him, demanding "Teacher-- tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Note that Jesus' response is one of compassion on him. "Friend," he calls him, "Friend....you've got me mixed up with someone else. I'm not a judge or arbitrator over you." And then it's as if Jesus says: "But, if you'll let me, I will be your Teacher...listen as I help you see the water you're immersed in. "Take care. Be on your guard," he cautions. Guard against all kinds of greed, for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

This is clearly not what the guy wanted to hear. He wanted an advocate, not a spiritual guide. Listen to his response. Did you notice how many times, over and over again, he uses "I, me and mine?" This guy is immersed. He's swimming in the deep end of self-centered acquisition and consumption. And he has no idea of what he's missing out on.

"I have nowhere to store my crops. I will do this. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones so I can store my grain and my goods...."

He's lost track of the fact that all this abundance is blessing, a gift from God. His focus is solely inward. He's not acting like another biblical figure, Joseph, who built big barns to store grain SO THAT, when famine came, he could feed the people. No, this guy thinks it's all his. He is immersed in himself and in his stuff and in the unfounded belief that all his stuff will guarantee his well-being and his soul.

Jesus, the Great Teacher, wants to re-orient him. Listen to God who points you outward, towards God and neighbor. You need a new plumb-line, a new compass, a new north star--and you don't even yet know that you need it.

Hear another story. In 1914, not long after the sinking of the Titanic, Congress convened a hearing to determine what had happened in another nautical tragedy. In January of that year, in thick fog off the Virginia coast, the steamship Monroe was rammed by the merchant vessel Nantucket and eventually sank. Forty-one sailors lost their lives in the ice-cold waters of the Atlantic.

Osmyn Berry, captain of the Nantucket, was arraigned on charges. But in the course of the trial, the captain of the Monroe, Edward Johnson, was questioned on the stand for over five hours. During cross-examination, it was learned that Johnson navigated the Monroe with a steering compass that deviated as much as two degrees from the standard magnetic compass. It was the practice of the time to use such instruments, and Captain Johnson believed the instrument to be sufficiently true to navigate the ship.

The faulty compass, thought to be sufficient, proved to be otherwise. At the conclusion of the trial, the New York Times ran a photo of the two captains, who met, clasped hands, and sobbed on one another's shoulders.

As our spiritual guide, Jesus the true Teacher longs to place a new compass in our hearts. He wants us to become aware of our immersions, the frameworks and accepted practices we have come to take for granted as sufficient and normal, and replace them with a deep immersion in the love--the generous love of our God. He longs to re-orient us to a life of love of God and love of neighbor.

When the guy called out to him from the crowd that day, I wondered why Jesus called him "Friend." As far as we know, they'd never met. I think Jesus called him "Friend" for possibly a couple reasons. First, the guy had shown up that day. He was there amidst the disciples and the crowds eager to hear that new Teacher. And as we know, showing up is half the battle.

But he took another step towards wisdom as well. He put his question out there. He revealed an inward longing. He didn't yet know what question he really needed to ask, but he was there, asking, inquiring, seeking. And I think that perhaps Jesus saw something in him, heard something in his voice, loved him enough to see him as a brand-new potential disciple, and called him "Friend." He wanted him to get to the next question: how do I become rich toward God?

And maybe most importantly, Jesus' basic stance towards us all is one of compassion and longing. He longs for us to turn to God. He longs for us to know God. He compassionately longs for us to be his disciples, rich toward God, who walk in the way that leads to life.

And for this to happen, Jesus knows that we need to recalibrate the compass of our heart. As Martin Luther put it: "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your god." The guy in today's encounter with Jesus doesn't realize what his heart is clinging to, that his stuff has become his god. You fool, God says. In Scripture, a fool is someone who lacks the wisdom that comes with the knowledge of God. A fool is someone who, in pride, thinks of him or herself as wise, but who acts in ways contrary to the ways of God. A fool is someone who, deliberately or inadvertently, follows a lifestyle or commits specific acts that bring harm to others.

Psalm 14: "Fools say in their hearts, 'there is no God...The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.'"

Jesus wants us to recalibrate our hearts so that we are no longer fools but friends, disciples seeking the wisdom of God. "Above all else, guard your heart," we read in Proverbs, "for everything you do flows from it." Guard your heart—that is, be careful of what's in it. How do we do that? One writer puts it this way: "Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love."

Follow me, Jesus commands us, one and all. Follow me and align your loves and your longings with mine. Follow me and learn to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and seek with me the kingdom of God.

And so, with the Psalmist let us pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me....restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me in a willing spirit." For I want to be rich toward you.

Amen.

Notes:

This sermon draws extensively on the work of James K.A. Smith in *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016. Illustrations and quotes are from this book.

I also rely on the insights of *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol. 3*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

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