

August 4, 2019 • Holy Communion

## “Look Beyond Yourself”

Homily 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 toward God.”

Our worship this morning brings both this provoking story from Luke’s Gospel and the privilege of participating in the sacrament of Holy Communion, taking us right to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. As in everything, Jesus points us to a life that is rich towards God.

“Rich towards God.” Three words. Three words that intrigue us, tease us a bit, leave us wondering just what it means to be rich towards God...three words that sum up the Christian journey.

Jesus gets to that message, as he usually does, by telling a story, this time the one we call the Story of the Rich Fool. You heard it—the land had produced in abundance. This guy doesn’t seem to get that it’s not just all his to take and keep. Did you notice how many “I,” “me” and “mine” are in that story? “I have no place to store **my** crops. What will **I** do? **I** will build bigger barns and **I** will store all **my** grain and all **my** goods.” Whoa! God’s gifts from the land, freely given for the good all, have become this one guy’s to keep and hoard. Emotionally and spiritually this old fool has the mindset of a 2-year-old. “Mine! I do it!”

In some ways, we all fall into the same temptation that trapped the Rich Fool into remaining two-years old spiritually. It’s the temptation placed before us to become greedy and self-serving. To think that our worth is measured in how much we have and how much we keep for ourselves. “Fools,” the voice of God says in today’s story. “If your life ends tonight, where will you be? Forget all that stuff in your barns and make yourself rich towards God.”

The rich man in Luke’s story did not have a space problem, he had a *soul* problem, as one commentator has pointed out. He thinks his only problem is that he doesn’t have enough space in which to store all his stuff. Moreover, he’s clearly put his faith, his confidence, his sense of future peace in the great abundance of his harvest and his barns.

On vacation this year, David and I rode the train up to Portland and back. Much of the trip provides a magnificent, gorgeous view of the coastline. Other stretches take you through the awesome forests of western Oregon. The beauty of God’s creation takes your heart and mind to a place of joy and peace.

However, there are other stretches along that route that are deeply disturbing. On the outskirts of cities and towns, the train rolls past extensive homeless encampments. Usually out of our sight, countless numbers of our brothers and sisters live in tents, campers, or under plastic tarps. Ironically, many of these encampments along the tracks lie just across the road from private self-storage units, lockers people have rented to store their excess stuff. The contrast between those who have virtually nothing and those who have more than they know what to do with, whose barns aren’t big enough.

Seems to me that we, as a community and as a country, have a *soul* problem as we strive to sort out what it means to live a life that is both responsible *and* compassionate, prudent *and* generous.

God wants us to grow up in Christ, to mature spiritually. To receive what we need, like manna from heaven, and to share the rest, with a generous heart and a compassionate spirit. To love God with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. In other words—to be rich towards God.

Keep on reading Luke 12 and you’ll find Jesus say it this way. I’ll read it from Peterson’s paraphrase called “The Message:” “What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way God works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how God works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don’t be afraid of missing out...God wants to give you the very Kingdom itself.”

It’s not easy to sort all this out and work together to create life-giving solutions. It’s hard, emotionally, spiritually and it doesn’t always manifest in healthy ways. We sometimes fall into the trap of lashing out at all institutions when they can’t seem to produce the instant fix we’d like to see. In communities across the land, people are lashing out against one another. There’s enough blame flying around these days to paper the walls of ten thousand super-size barns.

At the same time, researchers are reporting that words like “love,” “patience,” and “faithfulness,” for example, as well as words like “humility,” “modesty,” and “kindness” have each declined in use by some 50 percent or more in recent years. As they survey the millions of books and written records that have become digitized, scholars conclude that “moral ideals and virtues have largely waned from the public conversation.” We’re talking with one another less and less about the things that matter most.

As a people, we're going have to sort all this out, and decide again just what sort of community we want to be. It's as if God were holding up a big mirror to our lives and asking each of us: "OK. If your life ends tonight, how's the health of your soul?" We're being invited to become rich towards God.

We humans seem to need these wake-up calls over and over again, don't we? How many times have I had the conversation with you? Death comes near—at a Walmart, in an illness or the sudden death of someone close to us—and we always say: "We gotta remember that life is a gift. That we never know what's going to happen. That we ought never to take it for granted." But we slip back, don't we, and before too long, things get all twisted around again.

Thank God for church, for God's Word, for the persistence of the Holy Spirit, for this time at least once a week to put everything in perspective. Especially this morning, when our hearts are broken by senseless violence and so many mourn their dead.

Worship gives us space to pause and reflect, to seek God's face, and to ask ourselves: "How am I doing? Did I grow a little richer towards God this week?" For the ways we did, we give thanks. For the ways we slipped, we offer confession and receive pardon. And then through sacrament, through prayer and singing, through just plain being here, we hear God saying to us again: "Try again. Keep at it. I love you, my people. Keep growing rich towards me."

John Wesley wrote frequently about spiritual questions he posed to himself in his life-long attempt to grow rich towards God. Here are some of Wesley's questions that spur us all to think about the health of our souls as we prepare to receive the sacrament this morning:

Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am?

Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?

Can I be trusted?

Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits?

Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?

Did the Bible live in me today?

Do I give it time to speak to me everyday?

Am I enjoying prayer?

When did I last speak to someone else about my faith?

Do I pray about the money I spend?

Do I disobey God in anything?

Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?

How do I spend my spare time?

Am I proud?

Do I grumble or complain constantly?

Is Christ real to me?

I invite us, together, to sort out who we will be, what we will value, and how we will live together. And as we come forward for communion this morning, I invite us to pray for ourselves and for those worshipping around us, and join our hearts in prayer with those who will gather this evening in interfaith services in El Paso and Dayton, that together we might become richer in the sight of God and richer in the things that matter to God.

AMEN.

Notes:

[The Journal of Positive Psychology](#), 2012

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**First United Methodist Church • 1008 11<sup>th</sup> Street, Santa Monica, CA 90403**

**www.santamonicaumc.org ▪ 310-393-8258**