

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA

Luke 12:13-21

The words of Jesus today in the parable of the rich fool remind me of a wonderful little story written by Oscar Wilde entitled, "The Selfish Giant". I like the story so much that instead of a sermon I have decided to do "Story Time". So, sit back, relax, close your eyes if you want to, and get ready for today's story.

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful garden that was owned by an ugly and unfriendly Giant. This was truly a lovely spot -- the flowers bloomed in abundance, the peach trees always seemed to have their springtime blossoms, and the birds sang sweetly in the trees. Each day after school children came and played in the Giant's garden.

One day the Giant, who had been away visiting his friend the Cornish Ogre for seven years, returned to his home and garden. He grew angry when he observed the children playing in his garden. "This is my garden," he shouted. The children ran in fear. Immediately the Giant hung a sign which read, "Trespassers will be prosecuted!" and then hurriedly built a wall around his garden. Now the children had no place to play. They tried to play in the street but they found it was too dangerous. The Giant was selfish; he was not open to the beauty the children brought.

Meanwhile spring came to the land, but not to the Giant's garden. The birds did not come to sing and the trees refused to blossom. One flower popped its head above the earth, but when it read the sign and observed no children in the garden it slipped back beneath the ground. The snow and frost were the only ones who were happy about this situation. "Spring has forgotten this place!" they exclaimed. The snow covered the ground and the frost painted the trees silver. The Giant could not understand why spring had not come to his garden; he was confused. The spring came and went in the land, but not in the Giant's garden. Summer passed and autumn came, but the garden remained in winter.

One day the Giant awoke to the sweet song of a bird. He looked out the window and beheld a beautiful sight. Children had crawled through a small opening in the garden wall and were playing. The trees were in their autumn glory, the flowers were in bloom, and the birds were flying freely around the garden as they sang. There was one small corner of the garden which was shrouded in winter. In the corner a little boy was trying to climb a tree but he was unable due to his small stature. The Giant bounded down the steps and ran into the garden. The children were initially afraid, but the Giant had a smile on his face. He walked across the garden to the little boy, picked him up, and placed him on the branch of a tree. Instantly the tree blossomed and birds sang in its branches. The child

was overjoyed and hugged and kissed the Giant. "I have been so selfish," the Giant said. "Now I know why spring never came to my garden."

From that time forward the children played each day in the garden. The Giant loved all the children, but especially the little boy, because the child had kissed him. But although the children came daily, the little boy did not return. Over many years the Giant grew old and feeble, but the little boy never returned to the garden. One spring day the Giant awoke and looked out his window. There was the little boy. He hurried downstairs as fast as he was able and walked to the boy who stood in the garden. But when the Giant came close to the boy he grew angry. The boy's palms were red with nail marks in them, and so too were his feet. "Who has done this?" asked the Giant. "I will slay him." "No," said the boy, "these are wounds of love." "Who are you?" asked the Giant. The child only responded, "Years ago you allowed me to play in your garden. Today I will take you to my garden in paradise." That afternoon when the children came to play in the garden they found the Giant lying dead all covered with white blossoms."

In the gospel today someone tells Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." This request is not at all uncommon. "It was not uncommon for people in Palestine to take unsettled disputes to a respected rabbi for arbitration and judgment, but the fact that the man came to Jesus shows the esteem with which people held the Lord, especially considering he was not a member of the religious ruling class. Jesus, however, had been offering himself to the people as their Messiah. Psalm 72:2 says that one of the roles of the Messiah was to act an arbitrator: 'May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice'" (Richard Gribble, "The Parables of Jesus: Applications for Contemporary Life"). Jesus refuses to pass judgement, but rather calls the brother's behavior "greed" when he said, "Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed..." Now, you may be asking, "Why is the brother's request a sign of greed? Isn't he entitled to this inheritance? In fact he is not! According to Levitical Law, the older brother is entitled to a double portion of the inheritance because he is the eldest. The request to "divide in equal parts" (which is what is meant here) is a request to get more than what is legally owed to him as the youngest brother. This is in fact greed!

After refusing to pass judgement, Jesus tells the listeners a parable which is only found in the Gospel of Luke. He tells them the story a rich fool who decided to pull down all his barns and to build big ones, saying to himself "I will store all my grains 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'". This rich fool was like the selfish giant in our story from Wilde. The giant built great walls to keep others out, in the same fashion and for the same reason that the fool built store-houses. The foolishness here is not in the actual building of the store houses, or necessarily on the building of protective walls. The foolishness here is in the word "**my**". The rich fool says, "I will store all *my* grain and

my goods. And I will say to *my* soul...” In their foolishness both the giant and the man in the story believe that what they have is theirs, is their possession, their birthright, their property. “This is my garden”, says the giant. “These are my grain and my goods”, says the rich fool.

In their arrogance both the giant and the rich fool forget that all that is belongs to the Lord. Wealth is given to us as a gift from the Lord, but only for a season. The Lord had given the rich fool an abundant harvest, much more than he had planned for, but instead of praising the Lord for his wealth and helping others who were less fortunate, the rich fool says to his soul, “Soul, you have goods stored for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” The thought of giving to the poor and helping those in need never crosses his mind. The thought of giving back to God in offertory some of his goods by acting in generosity towards others never crosses his mind. He has let wealth corrupt him to the core. He comes first, second, and third. If there is anything leftover is his. Seeking material possessions and comfort has become his number one goal in life. His life is lived in the pursuit of pleasure! But, unbeknown to him, death was approaching and he would never enjoy any of those goods of which he was so proud.

There is a commercial for Prudential on television nowadays that shows a number of people walking in busy streets or malls, holding what the company calls a “Digital Retirement Calculator”. This calculator shows the amount of money various people need in order to maintain their current standard of living after retirement. Then the announcer asks the question, “What is your number?” For some the number may be a million, for some 2 million dollars, for others it is 4 million or even higher. Have you seen these commercials? Another way to ask this question is, “How big does your storehouse has to be, before you tell your soul, ‘relax, eat, drink, and be merry’? How much is enough? I remember thinking that the question in and of itself was a foolish question. First, it assumes that there is such a thing as a number. Have you ever met a rich person who thinks he or she is ‘too rich’ or even ‘rich enough’? Second, the question assumes that you will always need your current standard of living. But, do we even need all the things we have now? How many pairs of shoes does a person need to be happy? Is happiness found at the 30th pair? Or is it at the 40th pair? Please don’t answer this!

Now, there is no problem with saving for retirement, I believe that we all need to do that. There is no problem either with the accumulation of wealth. The problem is in believing that all you need to be happy is to have money, to have possessions, to be able to ‘relax, eat, drink, and be merry’. The problem is in believing that we are invincible because we have wealth and power. The problem is in forgetting that our wealth belongs ultimately to God who can take back at any point he wishes. The problem is in forgetting that we have a duty to share our garden as the giant did in the story. Who knows, it may

just be that poor person we help today who will show up at our death bed, showing the marks of the crucifixion on his hands and feet. And he will tell us, “come with me beloved of my Father, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and imprisoned and you visited me”.

Let me invite you today to experience the joy and happiness the giant experienced when he decided to share his wealth with others. Our lives and our wealth belong to the Lord and God will ask each of us three questions when we die, “(A) What did you do with the life I gave you? (B) What did you do with what I gave you? (C) What did you do about my Son?” May God help us find the right answers to these questions today, before it is too late. Amen!