

Twelve Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
31 July 2016

Luke 12:13-21

Preaching this passage in a Latin American context is easier than preaching it here in an affluent, upper middle class community, like Saint Francisville. In fact, in most Latin American contexts this passage would be preached as a passage against wealth and rich people. This was the favorite passage for a friend of mine to preach on at times when he wanted another building project, needed to fix a church roof, or desired to create a new ministry. I attended one of these sermons once and it seemed to me like he had a good formula: Grab all your parishioners by the ankles and shake them up really well to see what money falls from their pockets. His preferred way of shaking people was to make them feel guilty about their wealth and then to offer the new building project as the solution for their problem. There were always statistics about the number of times the Bible is concerned about money, camels passing through eyes of needles, building treasures in heaven... "Give to the church and feel better! This message was brought to you by way of Luke 12:13-21."

What if I tell you, this passage is not about Jesus hating wealthy people or money being inherently bad? Let us first set the stage. Jesus is on the move to Jerusalem, preaching, healing and teaching in small towns and villages along the way. 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 man 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 man is called a "fool", but once again, you may ask, "What is so foolish about what he did? This is the American way! You build a business and,

when it grows, you expand buildings, double the work force, add an additional shift. Why is this so bad?" 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 man says, "I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul..." In his foolishness the man believes that what he has is his and only his, it is his birthright, his property. He worked for it, he deserves all the gains! "These are my grain and my goods," he says. The other point of foolishness is to believe that he can control his destiny because he has built great wealth. "I will say to my soul..." In his arrogance he forgets that all that he has ultimately belongs to God. Wealth is given to us as a gift from the Lord, but only for a season. The Lord had given the rich man 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 person says, "Soul, you have goods stored for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." In other words, "Retire to sunny Florida and live for many years in great comfort." He fails to realize that his very life is in God's hands and that we don't have an assurance of tomorrow. All we have is this moment and the promise of resurrection at the end of days. We don't have tomorrow as a guarantee.

Once again, the thought of gratitude to God and giving to the poor 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 more! But, unbeknown to him, death was approaching and he would never enjoy any of those goods of which he was so proud.

There used to be a commercial for Prudential on television which showed 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. 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, I believe there is a deeper conflict here that Jesus (and Luke) are addressing. This is a conflict between two different ways of thinking, belief systems, and life styles. The first is the the way of thinking of Jesus and his followers. According to this way of thinking , the number one goal in life is building God's kingdom, loving others as we love ourselves, preaching the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. This belief system knows that there is a future that will be given as an inheritance to those who believe in Jesus. As such, they are resurrection people. They believe in eternity. Their goal is not the accumulation of

things, the hoarding of goods and services, the desperate attempt to satisfy every want here on earth. They know of a glorious future and that one day all things will be made right. So, they have courage to endure and they find happiness in the simple things of life, they are able to withstand persecution and pain for the sake of the kingdom, they place what they have at the feet of the apostles for the service of others. This is a lifestyle of altruism, love of others, trust in God, and abundant joy. This is a simple way of living that places God and others first.

The second way of thinking comes from the Sadducees and the Epicureans (an ethical philosophy well known at the time of Jesus). The Sadducees don't believe in resurrection. This earth is all there is. The only kingdom building that makes sense is the building of your own kingdom. To leave a legacy to your children is important, but, beyond that, what we do here really doesn't matter much. There is no eternal life. No judgement or account to be given later. The second is a philosophy many, including Sadducees, espouse. It is the Epicurean, "Eat, Drink, and be Merry, for tomorrow you shall die." It does not account for resurrection, and it encourages the satisfaction of all needs and wants here and now. The popular, "May your last check you write be to your undertaker" represents this philosophy. This line of thinking goes a bit like this, "Since there is no eternal joys in heaven, we must get our kicks here on earth. Worry about yourself and experience life to the fullest. It is all about you and your personal happiness. What you do here only matters to you, so make every day count. Thinking of the other often becomes a distraction. Altruism is for the weak-minded. Resurrection is for the intellectually unsophisticated. The only thing that matters is how much I accumulate. The one with the most toys wins at the end. There are only two groups of people: Winners and losers! Be winners, take what you want, fight to the end! It is a jungle out there and you eat or you are eaten..."

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. Ultimately, we are talking about arrogance, self-sufficiency, excess, a feeling of grandiosity, thinking we don't need God or our brothers and sisters, etc. This passage is about being "Puffed-up". it is not really about numbers and how much we have or we don't have. Forgetting that our wealth belongs ultimately to God who can take it back at any point he wishes is the real problem. Forgetting that we have a duty to share and to build God's kingdom with our resources is the problem. Jesus himself will one day say, "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." Living in community is what Christianity is all about and this life in community requires great love, the ability to be compassionate, and humility.

Let me invite you today to experience the joy and happiness that can only come from following Jesus of Nazareth and loving our neighbors as Christ has loved us.