

Worship Series: “The Hospitality of Jesus”

11th Sunday after Pentecost

“True Abundance”—Sermon Text: Luke 12:13-21

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

31 July 2016

“Abundance of knowledge does not teach men to be wise”

--Heraclitus (540 BC - 480 BC).

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People often asked Jesus direct questions and for their trouble received a story. In today’s reading Luke introduces the readers to a person in the crowd who instructs Jesus: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” It was not an unusual question, for even people today in settling family estates commonly rely on arbiters to settle such matters. But rather than play the role of judge, Jesus warns listeners to beware of greed because “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Luke here offers his Gospel readers a stewardship lesson.

Jesus’ parable, the “rich fool,” implies that anything that replaces God as a person’s ultimate concern enters into the gateway to idolatry. Although Jesus does not use the explicit term “idol” or “idolatry” in the parable’s translation we will hear, savvy readers recognize that idolatry is the issue at stake. In this parable barns become symbolic of mammon or money in Luke’s telling about a rich, foolish man.

In modern culture we worship the god of money—perhaps no different than in antiquity. Yet faithful stewardship overcomes this temptation to be possessed by our possessions. Biblical writers surely knew money is a god that never satisfies. Long ago Ecclesiastes noted: “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity” (5:10). The stewardship question may well be “when is enough, enough?” What is true abundance? Hear the day’s lesson:

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 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.” 16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself,

‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

18 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. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 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?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (Luke 12:13-21).

Jesus’ antihero in the parable seemed to have no larger life purpose than to build bigger barns. If the barn builder was intent on storing grain to feed the hungry, then he would have had a realistic mission cause. Yet the parable’s context suggests he wanted “bigger barns” for the simple purpose of having “ample goods laid up for many years.” So he could say, “relax, eat, drink, be merry.” His barns were bluntly for his security. Cautioning believers about the last days, 2 Timothy prophesies: “people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy . . .” (verse 2). When people seek security in anything but God, then idolatry flourishes. For this man, barns are money.

Money is a tool like anything else. It can be used for good or misused and thereby creates evil in a social sense. The epistle we know as 1 Timothy never suggests that “money is the root of evil,” as regularly misquoted. Rather it reads: “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). In this regard money is value-neutral—used for good or ill. Good stewards know the difference.

The barn builder, according to Jesus’ parable, has two primary troubles with his barn building. One trouble concerns his community; the other his outlook on life. The first concern is that bigger barns are simply for his own ease. They help no one else. The story never mentions what happens when drought or famine comes. Will he help others ward off starvation? Evidently his apparent thoughtlessness reminds us of another Lucan story of a rich man (see Luke 16:19-31). The rich fool’s blunder was regarding only himself. If the Bible is clear about anything, it is clear

about a positive answer to Cain's question (Genesis 4:9). Second the rich fool's hoarding smacks of a person only trusting his own skill to supply his need. This is not only ambition, but clearly idolatry. The true steward trusts God so that the steward will not need to stockpile—or build bigger barns.

The problem with greed, the insatiable desire for more is that it leads to a false understanding and thus a false foundation for life. The pursuit and accumulation of wealth tempts us to believe several devastating lies. Here are four lies by which modern understanding of materialism seduces contemporary society:

Lie number 1: The more you have the more you are worth.

Lie number 2: You earned what you have.

Lie number 3: What matters is taking care of number one.

Lie number 4: You can secure the future with wealth.¹

You may differ that these are lies, but according to the gospel, they will ruin you if you take their bait. Many have swallowed these lies, hook, line, and sinker. The lies illustrate an old maxim “the best things in life are free.” Perhaps, most of us agree with this maxim, but many of us are too afraid to live by it. The stories about the lie of materialism are numerous, and I want to share one. I took this story from a *Dallas Morning News* article that followed up on the 42 individuals who won about \$46 million dollars. They lived in Roby, Fisher County, Texas and these 42 lotto players pooled their resources and sent someone to Sweetwater to buy tickets. The story was about what happened to the winners one year later. As you might have expected, some of the people used their heads and paid off debts on land and businesses, but naturally, some did not. Boats, cars, and pick-ups were the order of the day. Even with winning a million dollars, the anniversary story tells us that some of the winners still had gotten divorced and had the same sort of domestic problems that the brother in Jesus' story had. The ramrod behind the organizing of the group lotto was a young woman in her forties who within that year the doctors diagnosed

1 Debra Brazzel, Duke Chapel, 6 August 1995, unpublished sermon: “The Lie of Materialism.”

with cancer. Money cannot and will not protect people from life.

Today we come to our church and in many ways it is spare and simple. Yet here an authentic meaning for life is offered to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus, God has given us all we need for today. More than that assurance, God has also promised that when tomorrow comes, God will again provide. When we recognize the gifts of life God offers, then we will be as rich as any of us needs to be. This is a promise from God. It protects us from the lies that money and fortune will solve all our problems. What solves our problems—and the problems of the world—is the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is this love that will not let us go that we celebrate and remember today. Amen.

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