

August 4, 2019
Luke 12:13-21
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“Future Securities”

Good morning! A wealthy and stingy old man who had no family and no friends, gathered the professionals who were taking care of him around his deathbed: he called his pastor, his doctor, and his lawyer. He said I have \$150,000 here and I want to take it with me when I die. I'm giving you each an envelope with \$50,000 cash, and I want you each to put your envelope into my casket before I'm buried. Each of you needs to be sure that the other two puts their envelopes in. They agreed. The old man passed away shortly afterward, and after the funeral, the pastor nodded to the doctor and the lawyer, and they each put their envelopes into the casket before it was lowered into the ground. As they left the cemetery, the pastor said, I have a confession. My church is doing a community ministry project, so I kept \$10,000 and put only \$40,000 in the envelope. The doctor said, my clinic does a lot of good, but I need new equipment, so I kept \$20,000 and only put it 30,000. And the lawyer said, you two ought to be ashamed of yourselves for not keeping your promises. I kept the \$50,000 in cash and wrote him a personal check for the entire amount.

This parable of Jesus in Luke 12 is likely the basis of the phrase “You can't take it with you.” Like many of Jesus' parables, this one would have upended some of his listener's perceptions. For Jesus' listeners, just as it is for many of us, if someone is well-off meant it that they had worked hard and made smart choices: prosperous people were people to imitate if you could, and envy if you couldn't. Prosperity was viewed as a sign of God's favor and blessing. This parable, as I read it, is not a condemnation of material possessions, but it's a caution about our attitude toward them. Do we own our stuff, or does our stuff own us?

[Slide 1] I think we would all agree that if someone is laid out in the back of this hearse, they aren't going to be using that fishing boat anytime soon. Nor will they be sewing anything out of all the fabric they have, or enjoying their collection of Precious Moments figures, or whatever else it is that we might need bigger barns in order to hold. A hearse with a trailer hitch just doesn't make sense.

I had kind of a traumatic experience this week: we had an air conditioning unit which wasn't working -- that wasn't the traumatic part -- the traumatic part was the duct work and air intake access is above a closet, so in order for the service guy to look at it, I had to move everything out of that closet and into the bedroom. This is a spare bedroom, so it wasn't clothes or anything I use on a regular bases. What am I doing with all that *stuff*? What would I do without it?

It reminded me of a book I'd seen, a photo essay. The book is called *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* by Peter Menzel. 16 photographers visited 30 different countries and took photos of families standing outside their homes with everything that they own. I'll invite you to take a moment to contemplate what that photo would like for you where you live. What I can say for sure is that if I had to take everything out of my home for a photo, I would not put it all back in again. Here is a family from California [Slide 2] the caption on this photo said this was everything except a few boxes of books. Here is a family from China. [Slide 3] Different stuff than I have. And here is a family from rural India. [Slide 4] Let me just note a few things which these photos do *not* tell us: they do not show whether these families are happy, whether their lives are fulfilling, or if they perceive themselves to be rich or poor or somewhere in between. It is quite possible that the people who have the most stuff consider themselves disadvantaged. Our perception of wealth has everything to do with what the people around us have, and what we think we ought to have. Jesus says, "Take care! One's life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

This man in the parable who was already rich and then had a bumper crop of grain is not portrayed as an evil, unjust person. But he is a man who makes plans to take care of himself without any reference or gratitude toward God. He has entrusted his future to himself and his

ability to be secure. And for this, God admonishes the man. God doesn't call him a sinner or an outcast; God says, You fool! All that planning and he missed the most important thing. All those storage preparations, all the gourmet meals with fine wine, all the travel he was going to check off his bucket list, and never once did it occur to him to consider God. He was rich in material things, but poor toward God. The rich fool learned that despite all of his possessions, his life is under God's control.

As I have prayed over the past two weeks, I have again been reminded of the wisdom of the saying from Marti Thompson's refrigerator. Do you remember it? What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you thanked God for today? That's kind of what happened to this rich man. Not only did he *not* thank God for his grain and his barns and the goods he'd been saving up for years; he didn't thank God for his life or acknowledge God as the source of life. He died that night and didn't see tomorrow. I believe this parable is not so much about wealth as it is about gratitude. It's about the irony that the people who have the most can be the least grateful. It's a lesson for people like me who have so much stuff that I actually complain about having to take it all out of the closet and put most of it back, instead of giving thanks for things which have enriched my life.

The text from the epistles -- that is the letters of the New Testament -- which is paired with this parable is from Colossians chapter 3. Sometimes the readings which are chosen for the lectionary don't seem to have much in common, but I believe there is a connection here. I think that connection happens when we consider what we own and what owns us. Listen to Colossians 3 verses 1-3:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Just as there are material things which we can't take with us when we leave this earthly life, when we commit to live our lives with Christ and set our minds on things above, there are spiritual things we need to leave behind as well -- Colossians lists impurity, passion, evil desire and greed. I suspect it is this reference to greed which is the

link to Jesus' parable in Luke 12. I'm not sure that the rich fool's sin was greed, but he clearly missed the mark when it came to gratitude. He assumed his future security was under his control, instead of acknowledging that all that he had came from God. The text from Colossians 3 is saying much the same thing, but is focused on the behaviors and attitudes we must get rid of in order to have the eternal security of life with Christ.

I believe the antidote to holding on to things we don't need is generosity and gratitude. At the root of accumulating things we don't need and will never use is fear. Fear that there won't be enough for my future; fear that someone else will take what is mine; fear for my security. Hebrews 13:5 says, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have; for [God] has said 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" Fear is fundamentally an attitude which does not trust that God will never leave us. Fear does not look above to life with God; and fear is an attitude can poison the things we leave behind.

It is a privilege to sit down with families in preparation for a memorial service and hear them reflect about the things which meant the most to them about the person who had passed away. Usually I know the deceased, and have some ideas what families will say. I am stuck by how often people are remembered for their generosity: most recently I have shared this about Frances Billet and Ronnie Martin and Jean Mann Graber; I know you have your own memories about each of these people. If you're fortunate, you can think of many other generous people; they have probably had a significant impact on your life. You can't take it with you, but you can pay it forward. Our legacy is not what we keep for ourselves, but what we have given to others. I'm not talking about money primarily: some of the most generous and open-hearted people I know do not have a lot of money, and there are people who give money away but are bitter and controlling. The kind of generosity I'm talking about is a willingness to work for the sake of others, to pray for those who are hurting, to rejoice when things go well for anyone, and to give God the glory. Generous people are not perfect -- none of us are -- but I believe when our lives are full of gratitude and generosity, there isn't much room left for evil desires or greed and fear.

Colossians 3:12 says, As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Our future is secure when we have closets which are filled with the clothing of compassion and gratitude and generosity: we can't take it with us, but those are the things we can leave behind which give glory and honor to God. Amen.