

July 31, 2016
Luke 12:13-21
Imperishable
Rev. Carrie Bail

Luke 12:13-21

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 towards God.’

As a child, I attended a camp near Lake Fairlee, Vermont for several summers, and I have fond memories of the journey up from Boston for its beautiful bucolic views, especially of the red barns. I still enjoy seeing them in the countryside, but more and more often the quaint little barns are being replaced by the proverbial Big Barns that are the signs of Big Agriculture. Even so, I can’t really imagine a Vermonter being a greedy individual like the Farmer in today’s parable from Luke.

To me, this fellow is a kind of cartoon character, a caricature that in this day and age we might call the Narcissistic Billionaire. The barns this greedy man wants to build are huge, really huge, believe me.

Why do I say narcissistic? Listen to this passage: it’s entirely in first person pronouns. The farmer takes over the storytelling from the narrator in the second line. Like this:

“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.”

Depending on the translation, it's well over ten forms of that first person in three verses, a greater concentration of “self” than you can find anywhere else in the Bible. I bet we'd have a hard time trying to match that self-centeredness in our own speech. Not only is no one else speaking; it doesn't even seem like anyone else is around. Until God shows up to demand his life.

Why did Jesus teach using parables like this? They are often called windows on to the kingdom of God, because there is some unexpected surprise or twist in the story that attempts to shake up the ordinary thinking of its listeners and see things in a new way. What was the surprise here for those ordinary people who were listening to Jesus? Is it that there is a rich landlord trying to get richer?

No, that wouldn't surprise them. What amazes the good Jewish people of the land is that this landlord misunderstands the purpose of a miraculous harvest. Everyone in that culture knows that God intends such miracles of abundance to be used for all the community, not just for the gain of one individual. Taking all of God's plenty for one's own enrichment goes against the most ancient of Hebrew values.

Who remembers from Sunday School the story of Joseph and his many-colored coat? He was the youngest of 13 brothers who was his father's favorite, sold into slavery by his envious big brothers. Of course it was part of God's plan all along, because Joseph goes into service of the Pharaoh and becomes his right hand man, his manager.

There is an abundance of harvest under his management, and he wisely stores it as a hedge against the famine which will inevitably come. And when those hard times arrive, as they always do, who else shows up? Those hard-hearted big brothers, who are now starving to death and desperate, along with their families. Their brother Joseph is there when they get to Egypt, first to forgive them, and then to feed them and save their lives by using the abundance of his harvest to serve everyone.

That story of God's miraculous harvest was engrained in every little Hebrew child. And when they hear Jesus' story about a man who keeps it all to himself, they are horrified. What of God's community, God's kin-dom on earth?

We also don't really understand that this narcissistic man was not just a plain old mom and pop farmer. The word used to describe him is the same as rich landowner, like in the other stories of Jesus, maybe even an absentee landlord. He is one of the elite who has managed to accumulate a lot of land and makes others work it for his profit. Ignoring the poor workers who toil on his land yet remain hungry is where his sin lies. And it is no wonder he finds himself all alone on his death bed.

Do you remember that story in Dicken's Christmas Carol that we all love? Scrooge sees the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come and witnesses his own lonely death, with no one there to care, and his servants dividing up the spoils as they wish. It is at that moment in his spiritual journey that he recognizes that his self-centered greed has destroyed all his community relationships and that Death, when it comes, will find him all alone.

Do you realize in our modern world that we are about to be overrun by storage units? Look anywhere: along the highway in the countryside, in the warehouse district in the city, in the basement of a large apartment complex, and you will find a huge number of places to put all the stuff that no longer fits in your home. Anyone here who would like to confess their use of storage units?

I checked it out on Wikipedia:

"There is more than 2.35 billion square feet of self-storage in the U.S., or a land area equivalent to three times Manhattan Island under roof."

Somehow we seem to have really lost the concept that the blessings of abundance are something meant to share with the whole community. Why do we all have such a need to hold on to things and to forget the commandment to love neighbor as ourself?

You know, deep down I don't think this story is as much about big barns and consumerism as it is about people and community. Let's look back at what prompted Jesus to tell this story in the first place. He and the disciples had been on the road, teaching and preaching and healing in many places. And two men – brothers - approach him. This reminds me a lot of the interaction of two sisters we heard about two weeks ago. At least those women had names: Mary and Martha.

You'll remember that one sister had a complaint about the other: tell my sister to help me do all the work there is in the kitchen, showing hospitality for you and all your friends. Gail preached us into thinking of a new way of looking at that one.

But here we have two brothers, and the little brother is not happy with the big one. "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. " I'm not happy with the division of labor, or the division of riches. It's not fair.

The aggrieved sibling wants God to intervene. Make my sister/brother act the way I want them to. oh boy! How many of us have had that problem, if not in the exact same words, at least in the thought that our family dynamics have left us with the short end of the stick? The Cinderella complex is one thing: but the question of family inheritance is an even more complicated issue that has brought many a family to its knees in dysfunction.

Here's a test question:

Is there anyone here today who can tell me that they have not seen a family – if not your own, then another one you know - torn to pieces over questions of inheritance? Siblings who refuse to speak to each other for the rest of their lives, or worse, who bring lawsuits against each other to settle the score. Step mothers who mistreat children; children who mistreat step mothers. You name it, you can probably find it.

If the message is about the abundance of God's gifts and what to do with them, here is the real point of Jesus' teaching. The only gift that never runs out and yet never can be stored for later use is relationship. If we treat another human being with kindness and hospitality as Jesus asks us to do, then we will have an abundant harvest of human relationships. The real item of value is

not the contents of our huge barns, but rather the relationship, the connection, that we make with one another: on earth as it is in heaven.

And look how Jesus answers: He says, “Who made me a judge over you?” Your relationships and the boundaries that help protect are your own to maintain. Asking someone else to set the rules for you is a kind of triangulation, bringing in a third person who doesn’t really need to be involved. Communicate directly and honestly with your loved ones: that seems to be Jesus’ message.

The pursuit of material wealth with the expectation that it will enable you to live life in whatever way you want, in pursuit of entertainment or security or any other worldly attainment, is a mirage. If you as the big landlord don’t treat your workers fairly, if you as the big brother don’t treat your other family members with generosity, if you as the generous host don’t lend a hand in the kitchen, the most important currency of human life, that love between human beings will disappear like sand through your fingers.

Especially within the church, your love and respect for one another must flourish, or the whole flower of God’s Kingdom will waste away.

As human beings, we always hurt one another, intentionally or not. And we must always, as the Lord’s prayer teaches us daily, ask forgiveness from those we have hurt, and offer forgiveness to those who ask it of us. Love, both human and divine, is the only thing in the world which is truly imperishable. Make sure you harvest lots of it, and use it right away!