

First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Burlington, Vermont

**Date:** August 4, 2013

**Title:** “You Can’t Take It With You!”

**Pastor:** The Reverend Peter Cook

**Scripture Readings:** Luke 12:13-21

*13Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”*

*14But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15And 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.”*

*16Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18Then 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. 19And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20But 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?’ 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

About once a quarter, I get a statement from my retirement fund telling me how I am doing. There have been years when I have looked at that statement and been pleased by what I saw. And there have been other times, especially 3 or 4 years ago during the economic downturn, when I could barely stand to open the envelope. Then I go into my living room in order to watch the news or the latest stock report. All day, if I wanted to, I could watch the Dow in a little screen while you listen to the talking heads measuring whether you I am up or down. Along the way, I could be treated to the usual fare of financial commercials. You know, like the baby, who from his crib talks to you like he is your investment advisor. Or there is an ad featuring a nosey guy who asks his neighbor how large his number is—it better be over a million. There is the Fidelity add where you follow the green line to success. It is like following the yellow brick road to the financial Land of Oz. And then there is that inane ING ad of people clinging on to their orange colored retirement money. At some point, too, someone will call me to ask if I have enough life insurance or if I have long term care insurance yet.

Watching and listening to this stuff, I could easily become the rich man who would soon be convinced that accumulating as much as possible as constituted a path to happiness. He built bigger and bigger barns so to speak to hold on to his riches. The image of the man with all these accumulated assets can give us all a profound sense of security. And there is truth in the fact that clear, prudent saving, looking ahead to your retirement, and enjoying the blessings of life which come with having a few resources is not a bad thing. When Jesus scolded the rich man, I don’t think he was saying that we should not be wise investors or that one should not save.

But Jesus did call him a fool. Why did Jesus call the man a fool? According to Elisabeth Johnson, pastor of the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Meiganga, Cameroon, “The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future. No, he is a fool because he appears to live only for himself, and because he believes that he can secure his life with his abundant possessions.”<sup>1</sup> The man’s issue was not that he was rich, but he was not rich towards God. He was so drawn in that he could not imagine how his resources could bring, joy, beauty, or hope to others, which would also bring some joy to himself, as well. He was too busy figuring out how to build a bigger barn so that he could store up goods which would not be used by anybody including his own family.

The rich fool reminded me of the television program called Cheapskates which featured a segment about a man who took his wife out for ice cream which consisted of mooching multiple ice cream samples from an ice cream stand. After sampling a bunch of ice cream, the man walked a way before actually buying an ice cream cone for him and his date. He did his duty to get her some ice cream. It is not that he had no money. He just could not stand the idea that he would part with any of it even if it mean that it would have brought a little joy to his date. I think his wife felt diminished because it was all about him. And he did not endear himself to the owner of the ice cream stand who shelled out all these samples under the assumption that he was sampling the flavors to decide which scoop he wanted to purchase. My pastoral advice to all of you is not to attempt this with a date.

Some people live their lives going from one stingy event to another, straining relationships because they have a morbid fear of spending money or giving it to anyone else. Then one day, they get sick, and they die having spent little or been deprived of giving it to any one else. They may have a million dollars. But when you are dead, well, your money is not useful to you any more. You can’t take it with you. And you were deprived of the opportunity to discover the joy of enriching the world and those you love with what God has given you.

I do not wish to glamorize people in poorer countries, but I would offer the observation that for millions of people it is impossible in their lifetime to save all that much or pay a mortgage. They could not store their crops in big bins and it would be hard for them to conceive how they could build a bigger bin. They would be simply overwhelmed by the idea that you could not have a secure retirement with out a million dollars. They live on a cash basis with no debt, because credit is not even available. For westerners this would not look or feel like a secure or happy existence. But for many third world folks they find ways to discover joy that are not built on accumulation. In these places, I ponder why it is that people with little have a certain joy that eludes more consumer-minded westerners. Since you have one life, you have to figure out how to find joy and give joy that is not premised on accumulation because in the end, it all belongs to God anyway, and you can’t take it with you.

One of the greatest blessings I have in this ministry is to meet people who have found joy through generosity of spirit and resources. Some people have fuller bank accounts than others. It does not matter really.

As we gather around this table, we extend a very generous invitation to all people. In this invitation, we empty ourselves in generosity for the benefit of others as Christ emptied himself for us. To live into Eucharist has roots in a powerful idea of hospitality based on the notion that when you go to someone's house they will treat you like you are a brother or a sister. With such hospitality, we take an interest in you and want to be sure you are well nourished. Through the sharing of this bread and wine, we share Christ with each other and the whole world. At this table, we die in our worldly ways and selfish attachments to rise again with Christ. Together we derive great joy in welcoming all and extending ourselves to others as Christ emptied himself for us.

May we be fools, but this time may we be fools for Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> Elisabeth Johnson. "Commentary on Luke 12:13-21." Working Preacher. [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1725](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1725) (accessed August 1, 2013).