

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 12:13-21

“It’s Not About Building Bigger Barns”

Since the pandemic began the best real estate investment has been . . .?
Anyone? Anyone?

Self storage units. As people moved stuff out of their homes to create a space for home offices, or moved stuff out of apartments to shelter in place in a different part of the country, or cleaned out their homes of all that extra stuff when then they had time on their hands while at home, stocks in the self-storage industry soared.

To help put things into perspective, there are more self-storage units in the United States than there are Starbucks, McDonalds, Dunkin’ Donuts, Pizza Huts and Wendy’s combined. In addition to storage units taking up space in commercial and industrial areas, they’re now popping up along highways and freeways’ on and off ramps. They are everywhere. And by the way, Texas has the most storage facilities and Rhode Island has the least. The average monthly cost is \$90 for the most popular size (10x10), and almost 10% of Americans have a unit. But don’t be embarrassed if you’ve had or have a unit. I have, too. Guilty as charged! And to be perfectly transparent, the only reason I don’t have one now is because I already have a storage room in my basement and a readily accessible attic right off a bedroom.

“Watch out,” Jesus says. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Ouch. Jesus couldn’t possibly be talking to me, or you, could he?

This is actually one of my favorite parables. I’ve sat in more than one church committee meeting that’s consisted of much hand-wringing over the shrinking size of a church’s endowment and how we’re going to run out of money if we don’t save more of it thinking to myself, and sometimes reminding people out loud, “We’re not here to build bigger barns”, only to

be met with a look of shock, or disdain, or a reminder that my paycheck comes from that big barn.

But this is not a sermon about how we should spend our Foundation. Indeed, later on in this sermon I'll state that we should be giving more to our Foundation. Nor is this sermon about the evils of money or possessions. Because the problem isn't money, or even bigger barns. The problem is what our bigger barns often represent: hoarding, stinginess, good old-fashioned greed, and an unwillingness to share.

Today's story opens with 2 siblings haggling over their inheritance. Whether or not this really happened is inconsequential, because we know this does happen. Heirs fight over furniture, dishes, silver, jewelry, property and money. In the argument we encounter in Luke, one brother wants Jesus to play referee and tell the other brother to give him his ½ of the inheritance.

But Jesus refuses to get sucked into their family squabble. Instead, Jesus tells them that greed is a very dangerous thing and that life is not defined by what you have.

So far, so good, right? We know greed is dangerous. We know we're not defined by our possessions; at least, I hope we do.

But then, he tells a story about a farmer who had a terrific crop and the story line gets a little murky. The farmer's crop was so good, Jesus tells us, he didn't have enough barn space for his harvest. So the farmer starts to think out loud. "What can I do with this wonderful harvest? I know, I'll tear down my small barn and build a bigger barn. Then I'll gather my harvest and put it in the new barns. When I'm done doing this I can give myself a pat on the back and say, 'Self, well done. Eat, drink and be merry. You can now retire.'"

Now, how do you think that farmer feels? Great, I bet. Satisfied with a job well done. Relieved that he can finally retire after years of hard work. After all, farming is a difficult life. What wise farmer wouldn't want to build a bigger barn to store his extra crop?

Now again, let me be clear, the problem isn't the bigger barn. The farmer's desire to seek a long-term solution to his abundant crop isn't bad. In fact, there's a Biblical precedent for it. Back in the book of Genesis, when Joseph dreamt there would be a seven year bounty followed by a seven year famine, he instructed Pharaoh to store all the crops from the bounty so the people could get through the famine. And God was fine with that.

But this farmer is no Joseph, who wisely discerned the times and acted appropriately for the benefit of those in need. Rather, this farmer is a narcissist and only focused on himself as he tells his inner self to relax, eat, drink and be merry because "I, I, have enough stored for years to come."

Notice the farmer's consistent focus on 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...."

Friends, the farmer gives no thought to using his abundance to help others; there is no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, nor any recognition of God at all. The farmer, in fact, has fallen prey to worshiping the most popular of gods: the Unholy Trinity of "me, myself, and I."

And it's that narcissism that is his undoing, because the notion that he needs no one, depends on no one, can do it all alone, and doesn't need to help anyone, will prove to be fatal.

Clarence Jordan, in his *Cotton Patch* paraphrase of this parable, translates it this way: "You all be careful and stay on your guard against all kinds of greediness. For a person's life is not for the piling up of possessions."

Jordan says in his sermon on this parable that the key point comes in verse 20 when God says to the rich farmer, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you". But, Jordan points out: "God didn't kill that man," He preaches: "It's the third person plural (in the Greek). 'They are demanding your soul from you.' Who is 'they'? (Jordan asks.) All these barns, all these granaries, all these fields, all this stuff he (the farmer) has

given himself over the years. They are demanding.” (Cotton Patch Sermons, p 82)

It is not that the farmer will die that evening, but that his wealth and his possessions are demanding his soul. They demand control of his life—lock, stock, and barrel. He now lives in bondage to the very things he thought would serve him.

Now to be clear, Jesus did not condemn the farmer for enjoying life. Jesus loved to eat, drink, and be merry. But at the same time, Jesus often rebuked those who set their eyes on possessions, because the accumulation of possessions often separates us from other people. And when that happens our focus turns inward. And the danger is that we may become self-serving, self-centered, and selfish, just like the farmer.

For centuries, theologians have defined sin as missing a target of ideal human behavior, or violating select divine commandments, or even being in a state of rebellion against God or separation from God. Today, others define sin as the fundamental state of ego-centrism that consumes our lives. At its core, sin in both the individual and the social context is rooted in human self-centeredness, self-obsession, and selfishness. It is found in the condition of living for oneself alone and a callous disregard for the needs of others. The underlying nature of human sin is an overwhelmingly dominant focus on myself, my needs, and my desires.

A life lived for one’s self often results in a hard and cold heart. It drives out compassion and concern for the needs of others. And the pride, ego, arrogance, insecurity, and ignorance that often accompanies it detract one from recognizing the contribution of others and the need for others.

I’m willing to bet the entirety of the farmer’s barns that his good crops weren’t the result of only his hard labors, or his time, or his money. I bet those good crops were the result of the collaborative efforts of many. For you see immature people like the farmer who suffer from illusions of grandeur tend to think it’s all about them. Mature people know better; they understand that leadership isn’t about self-serving behavior. It’s about service beyond one’s self.

Friends, No one is an island, and no one goes it alone. The myth of the self-made man is just that – a myth. All of us have people who have gone before us upon whose shoulders we stand and who have helped to make us who we are. Why just look around you at the beauty of this sanctuary and think of the people who made this possible and continue to make it possible with the gifts they've made to our Foundation that support the church on a daily basis. Where would we be if they had just built bigger barns?

We need those people and . . . we need to be those people for others. Your gifts matter. The legacy you leave matters. In a few minutes we'll bless the backpacks of our students. What you do today, what you give today, the legacy you leave them – matters. And eventually the legacy they will leave for future generations will matter. This church can claim the mantle of being the oldest continuously operating church in Fort Wayne because generations before you have decided that helping others, helping others through their church, is more important than building a bigger barn. Because it's in community that we find sustenance and hope, and comfort and help. We don't find that alone, living alone, in our big barn filled with stuff, believing in the trinity of me, myself, and I.

Friends, as we look toward the Fall and stewardship and budgets and all those things that pertain to money, it's worth asking ourselves as a congregation, "What does it mean for us to be a people who are 'rich towards God?'" Let me suggest that for some of you it means sharing more and keeping less; and for others it means doing more and sitting less. Of course, only you can discern what this parable is calling you to do, but discernment requires that you free yourself from distractions to achieve proper perspective.

I want to close with an old Russian fable that nicely frames our reflections on this parable:

An old woman died and was taken to the judgment seat by angels. While examining her records, however, the judge could not find a single act of charity performed by the woman except for once having given a carrot to a

starving beggar. Such, however, is the power of a single deed of love that it was decreed that she be taken up to heaven on the strength of that carrot. The carrot was brought to court and given to her. The moment she caught hold of it, it began to rise, as if pulled by some invisible string lifting her up toward the sky. A beggar appeared. He clutched the hem of her garment and was lifted along with her. A third person caught hold of the beggar's foot and was lifted too. Soon there was a long line of persons being lifted up to heaven by that carrot. And strange as it may seem, the woman did not feel the weight of all those people who held onto her. In fact, since she was looking heavenward, she did not see them.

Higher and higher they rose, until they were almost near the heavenly gates. That is when the woman looked back to catch a last glimpse of the earth and saw this whole train of people behind her. She was indignant. She gave an imperious wave of her hand and shouted, "Off! Off, all of you. This carrot was mine." And in making that gesture, she let go of the carrot for a moment and down fell the whole train.

Amen.

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