

Aldersgate UMC

Sunday, August 3, 2025

“The Richest Hill on Earth”

Pastor Sue McNicol

Luke 12:13-21

*The Parable of The Rich Fool (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)*

*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.”*

We seem to be navigating lots of parables lately in worship and today’s parable comes to us as part of the revised common lectionary. This Lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture texts following the liturgical year and are designed to be used in worship week-by-week to guide worship and provide a balanced overview of the bible. For better (or worse), I like to structure sermons around these pre-selected texts to challenge myself to grow...and stretch (some of the scripture selections are difficult to unpack) ...but ultimately, they help us dive deeper into scripture. I also am surprised at times by how “timely” these selections may be to current events, knowing fulling that the lectionary is set in place without a connection to national or world happenings. That must be God’s special touch at work.

Let’s “unpack” our gospel reading this morning. We hear how Jesus rejects the role of judge or divider and elects not to participate in satisfying greed in this family dispute. We also are reminded one’s life does not consist of an abundance of possessions if its primary intention is to store treasures for oneself but not be rich toward God. So, what then is the message? Are we to purge all we have, move into a “tiny house” and live as if there’s no future to prepare for?

Well let’s time travel for a moment and explore how living right here, in Butte American, might guide us in understanding this parable.

I'm certain those living in Butte mining camps in the 1860's lived in "tiny houses" so to speak, while prospecting for gold and silver and dreaming of building bigger "barns" to store their "crops." And when copper became the dominant industry in the late 1800's and early 1900's, the city and its culture were transformed. Butte truly was the *Richest Hill on Earth*, generating more wealth than the California and Alaska gold rushes combined. *(an aside) I grew up a kid of The Anaconda Company in Great Falls and can still hear the clicking sound of the train passing my bedroom window each morning – full of copper slabs on their way to other parts of the world.*

And here's where the delicate dance of deciphering the parable "better a poor farmer than a rich fool" come into play. What defines riches? Are we to assume the riches speak only about the wealth derived from minerals extracted from these hills? Or is it much, much more? The boom that was sparked by riches found in the ground, sparked other happenings as well – it sparked a community rich with diverse immigrants right here in Butte and was comprised of (listen to this amazing list): Irish, Welch, Cornish, English, Fins, Serbians, Scotch, Italians, Swedes, Greeks, Afghans, Norwegians, Mexicans, Germans, Turks, Chinese, Austrian, French-Canadian, Polish, Spanish, African-Americans, Native Americans, and more – bringing with them their beautiful cultures and cuisines, not to mention their wealth of expertise and vision. Having recently spent time enjoying Butte's Annual Folk Festival, we need not look far to appreciate the richness of diversity and inclusion in our midst, in these hills.

Giving some of the harvest to others never crossed the mind of the brother in today's reading. We hear repeatedly the use of possessive pronouns – "my grain" – "my goods" – "my soul" and perhaps there was plenty of that language used here as well – "my copper" – "my mansion."

It's this preoccupation with possessions, need for self-sufficiency, absence of compassion and hollowness that gives us pause when we explore this parable. Which is why I believe people of faith are at the center of God's message, way back when... and still today. Where do we witness God's teachings not only in this parable, but in our communities of old and present? The Richest Hill on Earth is a perfect example. We evolve, shift, and stretch when we invite a higher power into our thinking and understanding. I say "higher power" because we don't live in a strictly Christian community, but we do live among many who embrace the existence of a spirit greater than ourselves. And together, we try to find ways to share what we have with others, not by storing up our riches, but by widening the sidebars of our community. AND, but adapting to new understandings of our world TODAY.

As stewards of the earth, we see reclamation projects and environmental protection efforts evolving from what was once just seen as a hole full of riches. We have opportunities to explore other cultures without even leaving our hometown, and we experience appreciation of perseverance and simplicity through the passing down of stories from those who lived here before us. We have catapulted from an identify focused on mountains of gems to our celebration of a community connected across valleys of multiplicity.

Returning to our scripture reading for a moment, notice how harsh Jesus is with the main character in our parable. Listen to the succinct summation in The Message bible version of today's gospel:

*The farmer said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!'*

*"Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight, you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?'*

*"That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."*

It's over so quickly when God says – “tonight you die” – what a plot twist! Life is full of plot twists and planning for “what if’s” is a delicate dance. What if the earth runs out of riches? What if our climate is changing and we face threats of wildfire and flood? What if our alliances shift and we no longer have connections with people and resources necessary for our way of life? What if programs and services are cut off and we are faced with devastating consequences? What if all the resources stored up in “one big barn” could serve thousands, if only the barn was available to many and not just a few.

Lately, I've been enjoying “The Book of Alchemy” by Suleika Jaouad. It's a quick way for me to explore insights from one hundred writers, artists and thinkers. It challenges me to explore the divine gifts of others, and even my own quirky and creative wisdom. A submission by Nora McInerney, and American author who writes about dealing with grief and loss, caught my attention while thinking about this sermon. As she discusses her own recent widowhood, she writes: “I had no idea I was such a convincing actress, and no idea that “fine” was not a little white lie, but a brick wall I'd place between me and the people who loved me. Because I wanted to *be* fine. Small talk has its place, of course. But among the people who matter most to us, why do we relegate such a fruitful question – How are you? - to shallow small talk? And what would happen if we didn't?” In my household, which now includes a blended family of four children and a second husband, the only f-word is “fine.” When I ask how you are, or how your day was, you can say anything... except fine. And if you ask me, I'll trust you with the truth.” And then the writing prompt the author poses for the day is: “How are you really?” I so appreciate how this brief reflection addresses the human emotional struggle around “storing up” versus “sharing.” God's grace slips in when we become real!

Our lesson today challenges us to wrestle with the tug of greed, power, and control and to enfold God's grace and compassion into the equation. One way to reflect on whether God factors into where we place trust, is to examine what lies at the center of our lives. It often feels like a moving target. So, I encourage you to spend some time identifying what is constant in your life amid all the moving/shifting pieces. Speaking for myself, I can identify a few constants: my faith

is constant, my circle of love & support is constant, and my drive for continual personal growth is constant.

If I place these constants at the forefront, then determining *how* I move forward (using what resources and opportunities I may have) ...seems aligned with God's desire and my spiritual gifts.

We're not a "one size fits all" people – but we can be a people of many sizes, shapes and colors working together as one to continue God's work. We ARE the abundance! When faced with difficult decisions about what to hold onto and what to share...may we practice gratitude and enfold generosity. And may we fill our "barn" with God's abundant grace. Amen.