

“Rich Toward God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 31, 2016

Luke 12: 13-21

When Ann Hamel contacted Gary Shaw this week, to ask if he would read this morning’s scripture in the 11am worship service, Gary replied that he would. And then he said: “That’s the one about 401(k)’s, right?”

On Thursday, I got my paycheck from the church. As my employer, you pay me to provide services according to a job description that lays out certain tasks and responsibilities. For any of us who are employed, those are the usual conditions by which we are compensated: here is the job, and if you carry out those tasks that are outlined, you are paid accordingly.

For some of us, we may not receive a “paycheck” per se, but rather other forms of income. We may be retired from full-time employment, so we receive a pension or social security or other form of retirement benefits. Some of us may be disabled from an accident or chronic illness, and so we receive compensation for our daily living needs. Some of us may not have a job, may not be retired, may not be disabled, and so if we receive any income, it may be in the form of gifts from family, or unemployment benefits, or payment for odd jobs we do here and there.

Anyway, when we receive our paycheck or income for the month, we have to make decisions on what to do with that income based on the commitments we have made. We have to cover expenses related to housing, transportation, food, clothing, insurance, retirement, savings, and incidentals. For some of us, we use a budget to help track and make those decisions on spending. For others of us, we are more free-spirited about how we disburse our income.

When I was depositing my paycheck this week, and taking care of some of these monthly expenditures, I stepped back and realized that we are very comfortable. We have been blessed with two full-time incomes, with benefits, and we are able to live without a great amount of financial stress in our lives right now. The thought that went through my head at that point was, “Thank you, God.” And that gratitude wasn’t superfluous or shallow; it was deep and genuine.

That’s because I remember what life was like just six years ago. On the weekend that we dedicated this worship space, our family moved into our current home. It would be fourteen months later that we finally sold our first home. Fourteen months of two mortgages, of maintaining two homes, of racking up credit card debt. I have genuinely

been excited for folks like Jeff and Susan Roberts and others, who recently have sold their homes in a matter of days, because of the very hot real estate market. But I will confess I have also had tinges of, “Really? Where was this market six years ago?!”

At that time, I remember being anxious and worried, and dare I say even greedy, when it came to money and possessions. Perhaps you can relate. It appeared we wouldn’t have enough to cover what we needed. We truly were living paycheck-to-paycheck, and I was envious towards others who were not experiencing the same stresses. I thought if I could build up enough treasures in my storehouses, I would be able to provide for my family. In saying that, I forgot that it’s not my job to provide – it is God who provides what I and we and all of us need.

It was hard to trust that then. It is much easier to see that now in hindsight. And it is with that perspective that I am able to now say, “Thank you, God.” Does that mean I won’t worry about money ever again? Heck no. I am two years away from paying college tuition. I do not know what may happen in the future in terms of employment, or illness, or family, or other unforeseen crises. But, at least for now, I am able to say, “Thank you, God,” and be grateful for all of God’s provisions.

In the gospel narratives, Jesus speaks about money more than any other topic. I think it’s fascinating that for all of human existence, it is an innate weakness in us to trust that we will have enough for our lives. The deeper lesson there is that it is hardest of all for us as humans to trust another – to have faith in God – to provide what we need for our existence. So, we put our faith and trust in the tangible items of the world: money, possessions, homes, etc. And if there is one topic that has probably torn families and friends apart more than anything, it is arguments over money.

Take, for example, the story and parable we read today from Luke’s Gospel. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me” (12:13). That line could have been said in any courtroom or attorney’s conference room today between family members arguing over an estate. As members of families, we tend to argue over possessions or wealth because we transfer our love and devotion for the departed to these material items. We become afraid that if we don’t receive our fair share, or have in our possession that one specific item, our relationship with our deceased family member will somehow be minimized as a result.

Jesus won’t take the bait: “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” He’s not going to get in the middle of this family squabble. But then he gets to the root of the issue: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (13:15). Our love for family, our devotion to friends, our bond with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is not

based on how much we give one another, or who gets what in the will. A full life is one that is rich toward God, not rich toward ourselves.

To bring that point home, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. It's a familiar tale, but one that always bears repeating. A landowner's crops produced abundantly, and he was in a quandary over what to do. His great idea is to build bigger barns and taller silos, so he could store up all his grain and goods. And he convinces himself that this is best for him: "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry'" (13:19). Of course, this man's plan would have been great except for the fact that he was about to die: "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?'" (13:20).

One of the most telling factors in this short passage is the type of personal pronouns used. Whether it is the man in the crowd who confronts Jesus, or the rich landowner in the parable Jesus tells, the singular or possessive pronoun "I" or "my" is used 12 times in the span of nine verses. As one commentator puts it: *To be sure, saving for future material needs is one component of proper stewardship of God's bounty. Appropriate concern for the future is balanced, however, with the injunction to give glory to God and to care for one's neighbor, to provide for the poor and the marginalized, for those without access to the world's wealth or even to basic needs of survival. We should note that the man in the parable demonstrates neither of these twin aspects of stewardship – return to God and care for neighbor – mainly because he has become so focused on himself that he has forgotten both the God who caused the earth's bounty and the neighbor without access to that bounty . . . The man in the parable is so self-centered, that he cannot see beyond what he considers to be "his" harvest, "his" barns, and "his" own life* (Audrey West, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 312).

"So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God" (12:21).

We can worry about our possessions, and if we will ever have "enough." We can build bigger bank accounts, or stockpile all that we think we need to be safe and secure. We can do all these things and more. But in the end, what good will any of that do for us? For all of us – at some point and time – will have our own lives demanded of us. All those monies, all those possessions, all that stuff will not make any difference when we meet our Maker – especially if all we have been focused on in our mortal lives is ourselves, and not the one who provided all those riches.

In our distribution of income, in our choices of spending, in our decision to accumulate possessions – are we being rich toward God or rich toward ourselves? If someone were to look at our checkbook or

bank account, would they see someone who is rich toward God or rich toward themselves? How can we put God at our center – in our actions, in our thoughts, in our choices surrounding money and possessions – so that we are modeling to others what it truly means to be rich toward God?

When I receive my paycheck from the church, the first check I write is not for our mortgage, or our utilities, or our insurance, or our car payment. The first check I write is our pledge to the church. God gets the first fruits; and we then trust and believe we can live on what remains. That practice was taught to us by our parents. It was taught to them by their parents. And it is what we are teaching our children.

And six years ago, we did the same as a family. I will not deny that it was tempting to stop writing that check first, especially when we were faced with significant monthly bills and mounting debt. But it was a test of faith, and sometimes, I've found, it's in those testing, crucial moments of life that you grow closer in your walk with God.

That is why my gratitude today is deeply rooted. That is why we will continue to be generous and sacrificial in our giving, because all that we have is a gift from a loving, generous God.

How are you called to lead a life rich toward God? How are you modeling to the next generation what it looks like to be rich toward God? How can we as disciples of Christ show this world that a full life is not about accumulating the most riches, but is about using God's riches to build up his kingdom here and now?

Thanks be to God for all the blessings we have received as his beloved children. Amen.