

What's In YOUR Barn?

July 31, 2016 Luke 12:13-21

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Every couple of years Scott and I meet with our 'brokerage guy' as I call him. I suppose most folks would refer to him as a financial planner or advisor. Every time we meet with him, he tries to do his job by asking us 'so when are you thinking you might retire?' I mean, you can't be a good financial planner if you don't know what and when you are planning for, right? And every time he asks us this question, we both laugh like crazy and say 'oh, we'll have to work till we're in our 90s.....we'll never have enough saved before then to retire.'

It so happens that our brokerage guy is coming by next week and I looked at Scott and said 'you're 63....63! we really DO need to start thinking about retirement! Brian's going to ask us that question again when he's here next week!' Of course, Scott's first response was....we are NO WHERE close to having enough money. Not enough saved....not enough. I felt the same creep of anxiety and fear. How in the world WILL we ever be able to retire?

And then I felt Jesus' tender but incriminating stare. I heard this parable of the foolish rich man echo in my heart. I saw my focus swing away from the financial statements in front of me and back towards the Divine. I realized how much we were like this foolish rich man. Indeed, while we might fret that we won't ever have enough to retire, the reality is that we ARE the rich man. That we are starting out rich. That we are the top 1% of the world, at least by income standards. Did you know that you only have to earn around \$33,000.00 to be in that global 1%? I was feeling smaller and smaller under Jesus' gaze as my thoughts raced on.

How much IS enough? I wondered. Get on any financial institution's web calculators and you are likely to be told you need anywhere from \$1.5 -\$2 million invested before you retire. Seriously? Talk about fear and anxiety setting in! But let's remember those financial institutions have a nickel or two in the game; they earn their keep off of how much we invest! But I soon realized I was still asking the wrong questions. I could tell that my questions of how much is enough still came from a place of fear and anxiety, a place of mistrust and misunderstanding of what is important. I want it to be ok for Scott and I to think it's ok to work into our 90s as we amass just the right retirement bank account. But Luke tells me differently.

It's not easy being the 1% in Luke's gospel. In fact, it's downright dangerous. The poor always have the best seats the way Luke tells it. So the very beginning of this reading today ought to warn us. A man who starts out rich in Luke's gospel most likely isn't going to end up that way. And sure enough. Our rich man gets even richer at first. His fields produce bounty beyond belief. His crops overflow. His barns fill up before he has a chance to get to the back 40 acres. What's a guy to do? he wonders. He has an Oprah-a-ha moment; I'll build bigger barns. That's it. Tear down what is too small and build more suitable storage spaces. There I will store all my grain and all my goods. And I will then say to myself, 'Self, you've got it made in the shade for years to come. Your retirement account is not only sufficient, it overflows. So NOW you can relax! You're set for years and years.'

Hmmm....just when he thinks he's got the life style of his choice secured, along comes God. 'You Fool!' Fool? As I wait this week for the meeting with the financial planner, I'm thinking this guy is no fool. He's the smart one. He's years ahead of Scott and I. Or is he? It's no small thing to be called a fool by God. What's got God in such a bunch? This man did not come by his

bounty illegally. He seems to be a hard worker. What's God's complaint? God tells the rich man that 'this very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared... whose will they be?' Part of the answer to God's complaint seems to lie with the man's selfishness. Did you notice in his long discussion with himself, there is never any mention of another person, let alone of God? When the crops overflow, the rich man never turns to God for direction, never asks God for guidance, and surely never gives thanks to God for all that he has received. It's just all about him. But he also never thinks about another person. He doesn't wonder, 'which of my neighbors might need some extra wheat this year?' He doesn't plan to store his surplus so that the community will have a safety net in years of famine. There is absolutely no thought given to another human being....or to God. It is always and only about the man himself. That doesn't seem to sit too well with God.

But there are other clues to God's displeasure as well. Early in the story, Jesus is asked by someone in the crowd to intervene in an inheritance dispute. "Tell my brother to give me my fair share." But Jesus refuses and instead gives a dire warning "be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions!" One's life. The same term God uses with the rich fool; your life is being demanded of you. This is the crux of this parable, of this entire reading. What happens to our life when things and money and wealth become our focus. And it's a hard topic for those of us born and bred in the affluence of the United States.

Greedy, I'm not greedy I say. And yet my retirement portfolio never seems large enough. My closets overflow so that every year I'm able to give car loads to the yard sale. We have at least three old iPhones, 2 laptops, and 4 iPads on shelves in our house. Is that greed? What is greed? Why is it so dangerous to us that Jesus tells this disturbing parable to get our attention?

Well, read a bit of the psychology of greed and you find out that greed develops in situations with a 'fear of lack' and a sense of insecurity. In other words, when we are afraid that we don't have something we need, or when we feel unsafe, greed kicks in to save the day. I try to comfort my fears of retirement life by saving more and more. I put the security of my future in a bank account...the bigger the bank account the safer I feel. But the thing is, life is totally unpredictable. Just ask our foolish rich man! All the money in the bank won't change the date of his death. It won't repair a broken relationship or avert a terrible accident. Instead, it gives us a very false sense of security. Security that possessions and wealth can never provide.

And the most dangerous aspect of all this hoarding is that it takes our focus off today, off the life we are given to lead right now, and off of God. When I am so fixated on stocking up that retirement account, what am I missing out on today? When I place my security in a bank account rather than in God, what happens when life falls apart. Can my retirement account bring me comfort when a loved one suffers an illness? Can my stuff visit with me in my loneliness? Will all the wealth in the world heal a broken heart or bring comfort to a grieving wound?

Clearly we need wealth and things to get through day to day living. We are charged with being good stewards of all that God has showered upon us. And that means we do indeed need to make prudent and careful decisions about our money and our possessions. But how much is enough? Usually what happens is that having some leads to wanting more. Think about that. No matter what our income, we grow into it, and then beyond it. We think a certain amount is a great amount, until we get a bit more. I reach a retirement savings goal and then think 'well, another 50 grand would help even more.' It is never enough. The culture feeds this insecurity as

well, with the message that things make us happy. If that were true, we, the richest nation on the planet, would fair much better on happiness scales.

But a bigger issue is that we have placed our security and faith in transient things rather than in God. A new iPad, a bigger bank account, another box of shoes cannot fill the deepest longings in our souls. Only God can do that. And when we try to replace God with stuff, with wealth, with the pursuit of things, those possessions begin to possess us. Its always about the next thing. The trouble is that next thing brings us pleasure in the moment....but that moment wears off. We buy the latest iPad and indeed we have a ball setting it up and trying out all the new features. But the next day its just an iPad and we are the same old schmucks we were the day before. And so the cycle begins again. The fulfillment of the new iPad has worn off, so I need to look for the next gadget for the next fix so to speak.

Instead, Jesus says, be rich with God. Fill your barns with love and a connection to God. Well, what does a life rich towards God look like? According Luke it is using ones' resources for neighbors in need...think Good Samaritan. A life rich toward God is filled with intentionally listening to the word of God...think Martha and Mary quarreling over help in the kitchen. A rich life is one that prayerfully trusts that God will provide the true needs we have....think the end of the verses we heard today. A life rich towards God is one that gives generously to charity....think about the young man whom Jesus tells to sell all his possessions and give away the proceeds. Like I said, the 1% don't fare too well in Luke. And that can make us, as the 1% pretty uncomfortable.

But that's the point of the gospel right? Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? What would happen if Scott and I really chose to live in our fears about retirement? What if we did indeed decide to work into our 90s 'just to be safe'? Well, first off we would miss out on a lot of life right now. Our focus would be on accumulation rather than on trust and faith in God. Our barns, I mean bank accounts, would be full, but I imagine our lives would be empty. Do we, as affluent consumers in this country, like this teaching? No. But if we love God, then it is incumbent upon us to trust God first and foremost. To trust that God is warning us of these dangers out of a place of unconditional love. To understand that God wants freedom and liberation for us, and that our stuff and our quest for wealth actually imprison and enslave us rather than free us. Do we love and trust God enough to listen, or will we continue to fill our barns with anything and everything we can amass?

We have the choice; fill our barns with stuff or with God. Serve ourselves or serve God. Worship wealth or worship God. The foolish rich man is really already dead at the beginning of this story. He is alone and isolated; no mention of family or friend and certainly no relationship with God. Are you dead, or is your life full and rich towards toward God? Is this hard stuff? You bet! But God wants the best for us and it is not in barns filled with anything other than God! Amen.