



## Lectionary 18, Year C

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*Assistant to the Bishop For Leadership*

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text - Luke 12:13-21

### **Luke 12:13-21**

<sup>13</sup> Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus,] "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." <sup>14</sup> But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup> And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' <sup>20</sup> 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?' <sup>21</sup> So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

## SERMON TEXT:

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

My name is Mitch Phillips, and I have the privilege of serving as the Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership in the Northeastern Ohio Synod – so I bring you greetings from Bishop Laura Barbins and your 144 sibling congregations here in the northeast corner of Ohio.

And before coming to this role, I served in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod for 31 years in Louisville, KY – Evansville, IN – and the last 19 years on the south side of Indianapolis – so a special greeting to my friends in the I-K Synod.

When I read this Gospel text, I am reminded of a bumper sticker I saw many years ago:

*The one who dies with the most toys, wins.*

There are of course variations on this – the most books for librarians – the most skeins of floss for a cross-stitcher – the most tools for a handyman – and so on.

This seems to be a common attitude – whoever has the most of whatever, wins. But then there was the sequel bumper sticker:

*The one who dies with the most toys . . . still dies.*

I think there could be an entire seminary class on bumper sticker theology.

It is easy to laugh off things like this – and parables like this.

Obviously, this parable is not about us.

Fewer and fewer of us these days are farmers – and even if we were, we would not be so foolish as to tear down perfectly good barns just to build bigger ones – that’s not good business sense.

But – you know what – the more time I spent with this parable, the more it challenged me – might even use the word convicted. Before I finish today, I hope you see why it speaks to me the way that it does.

Let’s take a closer look at this guy in the parable. First thing to note: there is nothing sinister about this man . . .

We are simply told he is rich . . . he just had a REALLY great year.

But notice his thought pattern: I . . . I . . . I . . . I

Have you ever been so focused on “I” that it took a little reality-check from the world to set you straight again?

The one that always hits me when I think about this is when I headed off to Purdue to start college.

I was going to double-major in Chemistry and Chemical Engineering – and had tested out of a semester of calculus because I had been in the advanced math program in high school. There was a lot of I . . . I . . . I thinking. When I went into that first Calculus class at Purdue, there was a junior whiz-kid professor teaching to all the junior whiz-kids in the first row – and I was LOST. That FIRST semester I had to drop my calculus class. I took the same course the next semester with a different professor and did fine – BUT I had had to drop a class in one of my best subjects my first semester.

That was my reality check. And before I had returned to Purdue for my second year, God had made it clear to me that my life was to be a partnered journey – not just “I” – but “we” – me and God together – a journey that eventually led me to seminary.

But that’s a much longer story – and not the one I am focusing on today.

Well, this guy in the parable gets the ultimate reality check.

There are two significant problems with his line of thinking.

#1) As I said, there is nothing dishonorable or unjust about how he gained his wealth. The problem is his lack of concern for the relational dynamics that connect him, his abundance, and the community in which he lives.

Seems he doesn’t confer with family or friends or anyone else – much less God – about what to do.

He doesn’t consider giving the unexpected surplus to the poor and hungry – rather, he resolves to tear down perfectly good barns so he can keep it all for himself and secure his future years of leisure

Those who have studied first century society point out that this farmer’s approach violated the wisdom of the ancient world, which taught that wealth must be shared because the goods in the world are limited.

If goods are limited, then hoarding takes away from others.

The point of this parable is NOT that wealth is wrong.

But it warns of the misuse of wealth, the failure to use it for the common good.

#2) And then the second problem with this line of thinking - and this is even more serious: Believing that his accumulation of wealth is the source of his security, his way of life constitutes a form of idolatry.

Idolatry is putting anything - **anything** - at the center of your life other than God - and we human beings are really good at allowing things other than God to be at the center of our lives.

But for today's example of idolatry, the connection between greed and idolatry is present throughout the Bible.

The farmer's eagerness to accumulate greater wealth leads him to violate the two great commandments: to love the Lord with all his heart, mind, and strength - and his neighbor as himself.

His focus on wealth moves God and neighbor off-center and therefore is a form of idolatry.

Since he is not interacting with anyone else in the story, it is God who intervenes to name the farmer's folly.

This is the only parable in which God plays a direct role.

Since this is the only parable in which Jesus has God playing a direct role, perhaps that says something about the importance of the message of this parable.

God – the only one who knows all of our secret thoughts – responds to the farmer’s plans: “You fool!”

The presence of a miraculously bountiful harvest – a sure sign of being blessed – evoked no thought of God in the farmer’s heart, but only thoughts of his own security and pleasure.

The farmer’s sin of idolatry is reinforced in the concluding comment of the passage: as it was with the farmer, so it will be with those who take care to “store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

I said at the outset that this passage challenges – even convicts me. I’m not a farmer – and have never experienced a miraculous harvest. But that does not excuse me from the message of this passage.

I reflected back on my attitude toward the increases in income that occurred for our family quite regularly for many years.

And I think – like most folks – my thoughts immediately went to how that additional income would help us increase our standard of living.

But I believe part of the message of this parable is that our first thought should not be about our standard of **living**, but our standard of **giving**.

Some years we did okay with that – as we increased our standard of giving to the level of a tithe of our gross income – and then beyond. For many years, we contributed 10% of our gross income to our church, and then an additional percentage – that steadily increased over the years – went

into a savings account so that over the course of the year we could support other organizations and causes that we care about.

But to be honest, there were other years where our thoughts were more on how that increase in income would let us buy new furniture – or have a better vacation – or get a new car – or whatever it was that had caught our eye. We always had to remind ourselves through those years to be mindful of our standard of giving as well as our standard of living.

And then, about a year before the pandemic, the flip side of what happened to this rich man happened to us. Charisse's teaching career ended before we had planned – and with it came a drastic reduction in our household income.

We had to make a lot of decisions about our standard of giving AND our standard of living.

But we stuck a stake in the ground on our commitment to contributing a tithe – 10% – of our steady income – my income as a pastor – to our congregation.

And then we decided that when Charisse had opportunities to substitute teach, we would set aside 10% of that income to continue giving something to those other organizations and causes that we care about.

As we continued to adjust to a new level of household income, we had to keep reminding ourselves that ours is a God of abundance. Even as we ourselves have less, we still have so much more than the overwhelming majority of people in the world. God has blessed us with that abundance so that we can

not only provide for our family's needs, but also so that we can help provide for those around us.

One of the problems with our society is the scarcity mindset that seems to pervade EVERYTHING. The prevailing attitude is that life is a zero-sum game - where in order for me to have something, that means someone else has to have less.

But that is NOT God's approach to the world. God continues to create - and does so with ABUNDANCE - and invites us to take part in this continuing process of creation.

God continues to pour God's love and grace into the world - with the ultimate display of that love and grace having been the cross of Christ - through which we are freed from bondage to sin and death. Through the cross of Christ, we have the promise of forgiveness and eternal life.

God did this not because we deserve it - or because we can earn it in some way. God did this simply out of God's abundant love for us.

And all that God now asks is that we live in response to what God has already done for us - and live in the relationship God has already created with us.

I guess it should not be so amazing how an ancient parable out of God's Word - about a lifestyle I don't really connect with - can speak so profoundly to me today.

When I consider my income - and all of my blessings from God - I need to be thinking about the abundance God invites me into and reflect on my standard of giving as well as my standard of living.



Jesus warns us to be on guard against all kinds of greed.

Obviously, he knows that greed comes in many shapes and sizes.

And he closes by encouraging us to be rich toward God.

So, how can we be rich toward God?

Well, God doesn't need *stuff*

God is all about people and relationships

My image of heaven is that there probably won't be a lot of *stuff* around, but there will be LOTS of people

So first of all, we must not find our security in our stuff, in our own wealth, in our level of income, in what we possess, where we live – in other words, our standard of living.

And second, to be rich toward God means being rich toward others

- sharing out of our abundance – increasing our standard of giving before our standard of living
- caring for each other
- building stock not in stuff, but in relationships

Bottom line: loving and caring for our neighbor

I don't know about you, but this parable has given me a lot to think about – and I invite you to join me in some prayerful reflection.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we give you thanks for the abundant blessings you bestow upon us. Help us to be ever mindful of our standard of giving before our standard of living. May we

participate in your ongoing work of creation as we utilize what you have entrusted to us in a way that demonstrates our love of you and love for our neighbor. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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