

## Our Treasures

Luke 12:13-21

Some of you are aware that I just celebrated my 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday, which has gotten me to thinking of when I will start drawing my Social Security retirement and start drawing down from my 403 B be account; and what I will do with my time and talents when I finally do decide to retire. This has become something that I talk about on almost a weekly basis because two of my colleagues have already retired this year; and three others will be leaving by the first of next year. One woman in my department only has 5 more working and comes by my office to talk about pensions, saving and insurance. So I am surrounded by conversations and thoughts of money, time and talents. Have we saved enough and planned ahead enough to have a comfortable life after the regular job is finished? Another importance conversation that comes up is where will be leave our money if there is any left when we no longer need it. Will all go to our spouse; our children; our grandchildren? Will a portion of our resources be left to support the ministries of the church, or other worthy causes that have been dear during our lifetime? How will we spend our time and use our talents? Will we volunteer, tutor, mentor, consult, use our skills to help others? We have so many questions about how we will use our treasures.

From Luke's perspective, riches; those treasures of wealth, possessions, and elite economic status; were not neutral. They are inherently negative. People become rich by exploiting the poor. People used riches to enhance their own status (14:7-14) and lavishly enjoy their own positions in life (16:19-31). Mary first revealed God's negative attitude toward the rich and lofty (1:51-53). In her prayer to God she spoke of her lowly state that God had blessed; and how the rich and

lofty would be brought low. Jesus also shared such a negative attitude (6:20-26); when he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”...”But woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation.” Our scripture recalls and expands on these perspectives by depicting the life-threatening nature of riches.

In our text, Jesus was teaching his disciples amid a crowd of thousands (12:1) when an unnamed individual interrupted Jesus with a demand of his own (v. 13). He asked Jesus to tell his brother to divide an inheritance with him. According to Judaic inheritance practices, an older brother would receive two-thirds of an estate while the younger would receive one-third (see Deut. 21:16-17). This younger, less powerful brother, needing outside arbitration, wanted Jesus to help him obtain his rightful possessions.

Jesus' question in response indicated that Jesus' role was not mediator of family inheritance disputes (v. 14). Instead, Jesus issued an emphatic warning to the crowd to be on guard against insatiable greediness, because the meaning and value of one's life is not established through accumulating abundant possessions (v. 15). In the economic realities of the first-century world, insatiable greediness also had communal implications. If one person became richer and richer, it meant others conversely would become poorer and poorer, because economics was a zero-sum game. One's life was always intertwined with the lives of others as well as with God.

To illustrate his claims Jesus presented a parable concerning a rich man's dilemma. First, the fact that the person was described as being rich casted him in a negative light, given what Jesus had said about the rich in 1:52-53 and 6:20-24. Second, this rich man was not a simple farmer with a small plot of land. Rather, he controlled much of the agricultural produce over an entire region or district. Third,

in the perspective of his day, this rare bumper crop would have been regarded as a generous blessing from God.

Instead of a blessing, however, the rich man initially regarded his plentiful harvest as a dilemma, since he had nowhere to store his crops (v. 17). His concern over inadequate storage space showed that he had no intention of either selling or sharing his crops at that point in time. He was seeking a long-term solution. He would tear down his storage facilities and build even bigger ones. In and of itself, this is not automatically a negative action. Actually, there is a very positive scriptural precedent for gathering in bountiful harvest and saving it for the future. This is exactly what Joseph instructed Pharaoh to do (Gen. 41:32-36) when there were seven years of bumper crops followed immediately by a seven-year drought. It was only through wise conservation and planning that that Egypt and their neighbors were able to survive.

This particular rich man, however, was no Joseph, who wisely discerned the times and acted appropriately for the benefit of those in need. No, this man's focus was solely inward, as he told his inner self to relax, eat, drink, and be merry, because he had many good things stored up for many years to come. His solution to his dilemma of abundance also had communal implications. In future times of scarcity he would become even richer, as others would be dependent upon him and the prices he sets for food.

There is a significant irony in his instructions to himself. "Relax, eat, drink, and be merry." This man was so totally self-absorbed that he did not take others into account; neither did he take his own mortality or God into account. God, however, took him into account (v. 20). The contrast between the rich man's self-perception and God's perception was quite stark. The rich man thought he had it made in the shade for years to come, but God judged him a fool, because his own self would be demanded that very night. He had made elaborate preparations to guarantee

himself a comfortable, self-indulgent future, but had not prepared for his own impending mortality. God's question: "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" was left hanging in the air because the man considered no one beyond himself. In many ways he had experienced exactly what Jesus asked his disciples to consider: "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" (9:25)

Jesus' conclusion: So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (v. 21) rounds out his words on insatiable greed (verse 15). Here is the final, fatal outcome for one whose life was the abundance of their possessions. Here is the fate of one who stockpiled for himself and was not rich toward God. What does being rich toward God mean? Being rich toward God entails using one's resources for the benefit of one's neighbor in need, as the Samaritan did (10:25-37). Being rich toward God includes intentionally listening to Jesus' word, as Mary of Bethany did (10:38-42). Being rich toward God consists of prayerfully trusting that God will provide for the needs of life (11:1-13; 12:22-31). Being rich toward God may even involve selling possessions and giving alms as a means of establishing a lasting treasure in heaven (12:32-34).

Who are those among us who are rich toward God? There is a Detroit newscaster who uses her good name to support youth programs, educational, cultural and sports. Faithful givers who are rich toward God support the ministries of this congregation. Many of you who are rich toward God regularly give to local and national charities. Some of you who are rich toward God support children around the world. Some of you who are rich toward God care for aging loved one and give them security and comfort during their older years. There are untold stories of those who sit among us who are rich toward God!

The man in the parable and people who emulate his pattern of life are fools for leading isolated, self-absorbed lives, because everything they have given

themselves ends with death. Life is not measured by the possessions one has. Life and possessions are a gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion, precisely for those who lack resources to provide for themselves.

**Richard P. Carlson**

So, as I think about my limited resources; my treasures; and how I will use them in retirement and beyond – I pray that I will have wisdom to see them as gifts to be used for God's glory and honor, and for the work of God's reign. How will you use your treasures? I pray that each of us will be rich toward God!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).