

No Fool Like An Old Fool
Luke 12: 13-21
Don Lincoln

I recall the story of the romantic young man, down at the seashore in the moonlight, gazing in the eyes at the love of his life with great affection. Holding her hand, he gets down on one knee, and begins his proposal:

“Darling, I want you to know I love you more than anything in the whole world. There’s nothing that would make me happier than to be married to you. I know I don’t have a beach house in Avalon like Johnny Green, and I don’t drive a Tesla like Johnny Green, and I don’t have a stock portfolio like Johnny Green, but I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?”

She looks back at him with adoring eyes, and she says, “Oh darling, you know that I love you and think the world of you. But could you tell me a little more about Johnny Green?”

Isn’t it funny how money can change everything.

Jesus has been preaching, when someone in the crowd ask Jesus to instruct his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. In Hebrew law, the firstborn son gets a double portion of the inheritance.

Perhaps this is a younger brother – who wants more – or needs more. We don’t know. So Jesus’ parable could be intended for either brother – the younger if he’s greedy – the older if he’s stingy.

The parable of the rich fool is the classic rich get richer tale. The rich fool – a wealthy farmer – has a bumper crop that exceeds his storage capacity, so he decides to tear down his old barns and build bigger barns to store his blessing away. Then he can eat, drink and be merry.

I don’t know if you noticed, but the personal pronoun “I” appears six times in the story. And the possessive pronoun “my” appears five times in the story. Listen: “And he thought to himself, what should I do, for I have no place to store MY crops. Then he said, I will do this, I will pull down my little barns and build bigger ones. And I’ll say to my soul, “Soul you have ample goods.....”

Most of the parable’s dramatic action occurs not in the real world, but in the imagination of the main character.¹ The rich fool talks to himself. He is his own consultant. That’s the infallible sign of the advanced stages of self-centeredness and greed. You talk only

to yourself, about yourself. You don't consider anyone else. You only ask, "What do I want?" You don't ask what someone else might want or need, or what it is I don't need?

Of course one of the biggest problems for you and me is to see **ourselves** in this story. A colleague of mine recalls a children's book of parables his parents read to him each night, and he remembers being frightened by this one, and the man's life being demanded of him "that very night" – and then having to pray, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake..." "I just didn't really want to close my eyes."

But he recently found that children's book at his parent's home, and paging through it got to that parable and noticed something he hadn't seen before. He said the Rich Fool was pictured as a middle-aged guy, his hair thinning, with a little bit of a tummy growing.....and he realized – it was the spitting image of himself.

We may think of the rich fool as the ultra-rich, but he's not. He's just the Census Bureau's average American – when compared to the rest of the world. The tension in this story is that no one in this sanctuary will think this parable applies to them, when in fact, compared to the rest of God's creation and God's children, it applies to every one of us. But our culture of accumulation and wealth and greed is so addictive. It is so addictive it has become our norm and yet is so culturally accepted that it goes largely unnoticed.

Did you know that we Americans have 10 times as much storage space per person as those who live in the UK or Australia? 10 times as much storage space!!

I was going through my files reading through articles and I found an old sermon from ten years ago when I preached on this text, and mentioned there was a bicycle hanging on hooks in our garage I put there the week we moved in – back in 2000. I mentioned in the sermon the bike hadn't moved; but that I still had it. **Just in case**. Ten years later, it still hasn't moved. Actually the tires rotted out, so five years ago I put new tires on it, rode it down the driveway and back up, but that's the only movement it's had. Well, just two weeks ago Linda suggested we take the bike to the Habitat Restore. I grimaced. I hesitated. "Let me think about that."

So imagine my dismay when reading through my files this week, I found that ten year old sermon and what I said about the bike. I went out in the garage and looked at the label on the seat-tube and realize I bought that bike in Roanoke, VA. I left Roanoke in 1990. What am I thinking? That one day it will be worth \$10,000 on the Antiques Roadshow? The bike went to the Habitat Restore yesterday, because there are actually people who need a bike to get to work.

As Jesus continues the story, God says to the man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you." The language there – demanded of you – is the same language used for calling in a loan. Demand note?

Right there in the text, in that one little line, is a reminder that everything you and I are, and everything we have, is a gift from God. Culture tells us none of it is a loan, none of it is a gift, but rather, it's all MINE. I earned it. You and I have to continually be reminded that everything – including our very self – is on loan from a generous and gracious God. But this is a loan.

“But the real error in the rich fool,” writes author Barbara Brown Taylor, “Is not that his vision was too big, when he decided to build those big barns, it's that his vision was not big enough to include all the kingdom of God and what God would want to do through him. In fact, what had happened, was that he had allowed his wealth to shrink his vision, to narrow his vision, to give him tunnel vision. All he sees is his own self and his own needs.”²

Does our wealth expand our vision of the world and God's kingdom, or does it cause you and me to shrink our vision as we guard and protect and take care of and worry about? Is the money and stuff you and I have accumulated **isolating** us from our neighbor rather than equipping us to actually help our neighbor in deeper and richer and more meaningful, kingdom building ways?

For three weeks we've been exploring how the gospel's vision of the kingdom of God invites you and me to expand our understanding of treasure until it includes doing the work of the kingdom of God – on earth as it is in heaven. Not building barns so big that we can't see over them or around them to get a glimpse of our neighbors in need. Not building barns so big that we forget that by God's good grace we have been loved so that we might love. We've been forgiven so that we might forgive. We forget that we are blessed so that we might be a blessing.

Which is how Jesus described this man who has hoarded everything – rich toward things in the world but not rich toward God. That is how you and I store up treasures in heaven – by being rich toward God, and God's ways in the world. Here's what a colleague wrote, to counteract the bigger barns syndrome:

1. Make a list of what you need and a list of what you want. Purchase only from the need list for the rest of the year.
2. Declare a price limit on Christmas gifts, before the decorations show up in the store.
3. Make a list of three things you might give away this week – to the Thrift Shop or to the Habitat Restore.
4. Don't rent a storage unit.

But it's hard. Addiction is hard.

You know, generous people don't just wake up one morning generous. They don't wake up suddenly say, “I'm not going to fear; I'm not going to worry; I'm not going to hoard and guard and corral and store. I'm going to give away my resources.” It takes work. Beating addictions is labor. It takes discipline. It takes a commitment to setting aside, and giving away, instead of keeping, or just spending on yourself. Generous people know it requires work to fight the addiction of wealth, to keep from building bigger barns.

The biblical practice of tithing – regular, proportional, giving of 10% of your income – or SOME percent of your income – is a great way to fight that addiction. It's also good for you. Giving a percentage of your income away means already you are going to live on less than you make. That's a smart thing. It helps protect against greed. And actually, I think when you are thinking where you might contribute to the needs of others, it makes you a more caring person because you pay more attention to the need around you. You look for it. And with proportional giving – not a dollar amount but a percent of your income – when your income goes up, so does the amount. And if your income goes down, so does the amount. With proportional giving, each one does their fair share.

I'll be honest. I didn't start at a tithe. I told you before about my parents. The only argument I really remember was the time they were arguing should the tithe be pre-tax or post-tax. Dad on one side, mom on the other.

No matter how they modeled it, I didn't start that way. In fact, I spent all I earned when I began ministry. I had all the good excuses – first job, new house, new car, babies... So you can imagine I didn't preach much about tithing back then. But then I started giving 1% of income, then 2%, then 3% until over the years I got to a tithe.

It doesn't all go to Westminster. About 6% of my income goes to this congregation's ministry. A couple more percent goes to Princeton Seminary, where I'm on the Board of Trustees. The rest of the tithe is spread across a variety of ministries – or events like the Mission Possible in November, or a Serving at the Crossroads fundraiser. That's what my attempts to avoid addiction look like. That's what my giving to support the kingdom, in gratitude to God, looks like. But – I know, it's an individual thing.

Did you know the **average church pledge** of Presbyterians has generally hovered around 2% of income for as long as I can remember. That's the average church pledge nationally for Presbyterians.

But this is not an average congregation. I serve one of the most amazing, thriving, healthy congregations in our denomination. When it comes to the special offerings – One Great Hour of Sharing, Christmas Joy Offering, Peacemaking Offering – we are ranked number 6 in the country. And we are NOT the 6th largest Presbyterian Church in the United States.

WE'RE NOT AVERAGE. So – next week is commitment Sunday. Some of you have already turned in pledge cards, or pledged online. Thank you so much for your generosity. But a lot of us haven't filled them out yet. (Of course, if you want to rethink your pledge and have already turned it in, we have more cards. Just saying.....)

Think about what your household income is. And think about what your pledge is. Remember – the average Presbyterian pledge is 2% of income. If you're not up to average – might you get there this year – or get halfway there from where you are? If

you're above average but not at a true tithe – 10% – might you step it up another half percent – or another whole percent for this next year?

And if Westminster is not the number one recipient of your charitable giving – but your college is, or some other agency, might you consider moving your faith community into that number one position, that we might as a congregation be better equipped to love our neighbors?

Addiction of any kind isn't easy. But this is the one that is most widespread in this land. Addiction to money and things.

A friend of mine once said to me long ago, "Don, you want to get close to God? The quickest way to a closer walk with God is in how you manage your wealth."³ Exactly the point of this parable.

Take a fearless moral inventory of all the things that stand between you and God and you and others – and it is likely to include your stuff; your money; your possessions. The text asks us - Is your money a treasure to be protected or a gift to be shared? As I said in the beginning, money changes everything.

May it be so. AMEN

1. Homiletics, August 2007.
2. Jerry Deck, "The Rich Fool," November 8, 2015; Zionsville Presbyterian Church, Zionsville, IN.
3. Jack Haberer, "Good and Right and Faithful;" October 19, 2016; Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church, Naples, FL.