

Sermon: The Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12: 13-21

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Have you ever let your mind wonder about what life would look like for you if you had all the money in the world? What if you were to win the next Megabucks jackpot or be the only one who wins the Mega Million drawing?

Honestly, I have. One of the gas stations that I frequently use is in Hingham, and every time the MegaMillion jackpot gets increasingly high, the owner of the station puts up a sign at every pump to tell us so we should come in and buy a ticket (or 10).

It would be nice not to have to worry about money, right? Nice to live off the interest of some lovely inheritance, or to win the lottery.

Well, to have all the money in the world is not what it is cracked up to be. I read some statistics that say one out of three lottery winners go bankrupt within the first three years. And I think deep down we might even gloat a little when we hear that another of our cherished celebrities has gone bankrupt, or done something so foolish that caused them to lose all they had accumulated. To underscore my point, here are some of the foolish things the rich and famous have done:

Remember MC Hammer? He sold the rights to his songs to raise money after being bankrupted by his lavish lifestyle. Hammer earned more than \$33 million in the early nineties, but spent the money on a \$12 million mansion (with gold-plated gates), a fleet of seventeen vehicles, two helicopters, and extravagant parties.

Imelda Marcos, former First Lady of the Philippines, had an extensive wardrobe: 15 mink coats, 65 parasols, 71 pairs of sunglasses, 508 gowns, 888 handbags, and over a thousand pairs of shoes.

Actress Kim Basinger paid \$20 million to buy the town of Braselton, Georgia in 1989. When Basinger filed for bankruptcy just four years later, she was forced to sell the town.

While Swaziland prepared for famine and suffered from an AIDS/HIV epidemic, the country's king spent \$45 million (US) of state funds to purchase a private jet.

Boxer Mike Tyson earned over \$300 million in his professional career. He lost it all, spending the money on cars, jewels, and more. He eventually filed for bankruptcy.

And one last one: on the night of February 1, 1976, Elvis Presley decided he wanted a Fool's Gold Loaf, a special sandwich made of hollowed bread, a jar of peanut butter, a jar of jelly, and a pound of bacon. He and an entourage flew from Memphis to Denver. The group ate their sandwiches and then flew home. Price: \$50,000 – \$60,000.

In light of these foolish escapades of the rich and famous, our rich fool in Jesus' parable does not seem foolish at all.

The passage begins with two people squabbling over an inheritance. One must have been more unhappy than the other, and they are seeking Rabbi Jesus to make a ruling.

But Jesus refuses to get involved in the debate. Jesus rejects the request because he will not participate in satisfying the greed that he senses had prompted it. "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

And then, as Jesus so often did, he went right to the heart of the matter. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." From there he launches into the parable.

He tells the story of a rich man who is already rich, but now he enjoys a bumper crop. Jesus gives the farmer no credit for the crop; he merely says "the land ... produced abundantly." Now he has a storage and surplus problem. He doesn't have a place to put all his grain.

Using creative story-telling, Jesus lets us overhear the man's thoughts. The farmer debates with himself. "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? 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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample good laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

We find wonderful insights in this little soliloquy. First, notice the frequency of the possessive pronoun in his thoughts -- my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, and finally my soul.

Notice how many times he says, "I will:"

"I WILL do this: I WILL pull down my barns and (WILL) build larger ones, and there I WILL store all my grain and my goods. And I WILL say to my soul."

Here is self-made man, sure of himself and what he WILL do.

But perhaps the most notable aspect of his little speech lies in the fact that he talks to himself. Now a lot of us talk to ourselves when we are alone. I had a few things to say to myself on my recent bike ride. But this man's flaw lies in the fact that he has shut out everyone else from his life and his thoughts. There is no one else in the story. He doesn't even talk to God; but in the end God intervenes.

Here we find a lonely, selfish man preoccupied with his possessions. When he is faced with major decisions, he takes no counsel from anyone else. He doesn't pray about it. He doesn't think of anyone else. His only thought is that he can amass his wealth, hoard it all and "relax, eat, drink, be merry." He doesn't even indicate that he is going to invite anyone else to his perpetual party.

The thought of giving to persons in need never crosses his mind. The thought of sharing his wealth or even investing in worthy projects never dawns on him. Greed has eaten away any compassion he may once have had. The greatest good he can imagine is a life of maximizing his own pleasure.

Jesus calls all such behavior into question. In our story, God interrupts the man's retirement plans by saying, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The word fool is not a word that's used lightly in Scripture – in fact it's only used two times in the gospel of Luke – compare that to nearly 70 times in Proverbs. The foolish person is always talked about in contrast to the person who exercises the very wisdom of God. In Scripture, the word fool refers to those people who live their lives as if God does not exist.

Jesus parable reminds us that we'll never get the formula for our lives right unless God is at the very center. Jesus didn't believe that wealth or possessions were evil in and of themselves and neither are the people who have them; Jesus simply knew that wealth and possessions offer us a great temptation to put our faith and trust in them rather than in God. That's what was wrong with this farmer – he calculated his life without including God in the equation.

Richard Foster describes the temptation this way, "...[when] we lack a Divine Center our need for security [leads] us to an insane attachment to things." That's why there are warnings throughout Scripture. Psalm 62:10 says, "if riches increase, do not set your heart on them." Proverbs 11:28 reminds us that, "Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves." There is much more to life than having lots of stuff.

It is Jesus' not so gentle way of reminding us that we can't count on the future; we can't live in the future. We only have now. The important question is, "What gives our life meaning now?" In Luke 9:25, Jesus puts the matter this way, "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

And what makes us Christians different from everybody else is not that we don't have savings accounts; it's that the true saving in our lives is the salvation of a God who died for the love of us. And so our life consists of something more than what we can store up on earth. And our true life is still being revealed to us, every day.

"This very night, your life is being demanded of you," says Jesus, who knows in saying this that our lives really belong to him, and he wants us to know this, too. And so he exhorts us not to get too caught up in our earthly possessions/anxieties because there is so much more to what we are here for.

And God's dream for us, I think -- and it is a good one -- is that we live to discover this.

I love how Jesus puts it in this parable -- the rich man in the story is not criticized for storing up his treasures; he is criticized for storing up his treasures while not being "rich towards God." I think we are so used to being grateful for the abundant ways in which God has blessed us that we can forget that this goes both ways, that part of discovering our true lives is to give our gifts back to God and to the world.

This parable gives us the chance to ponder life -- to open our eyes to find that our life is more than what we see around us, more than what we can count, and what we actually possess is beyond even what we can imagine.

Storing up our treasures is fine as far as it goes, but our real value as Christians is what we risk living into our faith. And as far as I can tell, as Christians this involves some very specific tasks: loving God and loving one another above all but also forgiveness, generosity, gentleness and hospitality.

And not just believing in these things, but living them; incorporating them into our work and our play, our learning and our rest, our family and our friendships. And not because we have to. Not "or else" -- or else we will wake up and find a condemning God who is our worst nightmare. But because we know that this is the way that we truly discover the dream that God has for us, the kingdom of God that is here for us now, our true life and our true life's value.

Let me close with a true story: Alfred Nobel was forced to face that question about his true life and life's value. One morning in 1888, Nobel was quite surprised to read his own obituary in a French newspaper.

Obviously, it was a journalistic mistake. One of his brothers had died, and a careless reporter had used a prewritten obituary of the wrong man.

But as he read, Nobel was shocked and deeply disturbed to learn what the world really thought of him. He was seen simply as the dynamite king, the merchant of death, who had amassed a great fortune out of explosives. Nobel had hoped his inventions would be useful to people and to nations; yet he was viewed as one who dealt in blood and war for profit.

At that moment, Alfred Nobel resolved to show the world the true purpose of his life. He revised his will so that his fortune would be dedicated to the recognition of great creative achievements – with the highest award going to those who had done the most for world peace. From then on Nobel's image began to change. Now, more than a century later, we remember him the way he wanted to be remembered. Today, we all associate him with the Nobel Peace Prize.

What do you want to be about? What do you want to be known for? What gives your life meaning? I bet your answer will have nothing to do with your earthly possession.

Amen