

Proper 13C: Luke 12: 13-21
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A fool and his money are soon parted

A few years ago I heard a report on public radio. A survey had been taken to discover if money can bring happiness and if more money brought more happiness. The finding of the researchers was that money does bring happiness to a point. They found that, on average, throughout the U.S. people who were earning less than \$50,000 a year were less happy than those earning more. However, those earning \$75,000 or \$100,000 or \$200,000 a year were not any happier than those earning \$50,000. Having a certain amount of money, the study concluded, does bring happiness, but having more money doesn't bring more happiness. As they say in economics, it's the law of diminish returns. Having more doesn't directly translate to being happier. Or we might say, money can solve some problems, but there are some problems, many problems that can't be solved by money.

Hearing this, many Americans—and Europeans and Chinese, and others—find this hard to believe. I mean, no matter what we were taught by our parents and pastors, we soon become aware of the fruits of wealth—conspicuous consumption—and we continuously told through advertisements that we can buy our way to happiness, security and beauty. Indeed,

It doesn't help that everywhere we look, our anxieties are intentionally provoked. Watch TV or browse the Internet for any significant amount of time, and you'll not just be exposed but actually inundated with ads designed to exploit our inborn sense of insecurity. I mean, think how advertisements work—first they identify and exaggerate something we are insecure about -- our breath, our body, our status, our savings for retirement, etc. -- then they offer us something to buy -- mouthwash, a weight loss program, a bigger car, etc. -- something that will remedy our concern and make us acceptable again. Create an anxiety and then sell a solution. That's how you sell something apparently. And the result is, day in, day out, just driving down the road or sitting in our easy chair, we are confronted with how we don't measure up, how we don't have enough, aren't enough.

Which is kind of funny, considering all that we have—much more than most people in the world—when you consider the luxuries we enjoy—better than most kings enjoyed in the past. And yet we aren't more happy for what we have, in fact more anxious. In measures of national happiness, the United States, the wealthiest country in the world, ranks in the bottom ten percent with regard to reported happiness.

A few years ago I heard a report on public radio about a survey that helped me to make sense of this fact. The study was intended to discover if money can bring happiness. The finding of the researchers was that money does indeed bring happiness...up to a point. They found that, on average, throughout the U.S. people who were earning less than \$50,000/year were less happy than those earning more. However, those earning \$75,000 or \$100,000 or \$200,000 a year were not any happier than those earning \$50,000. A sufficient amount of money does bring happiness,

but more money doesn't bring more happiness. Nor does it do much to alleviate anxiety, that gnawing, haunting question, Is it enough?

Now, it needs to be said that it's not just we in modern, affluent societies who struggle with anxiety. What we have in our society is just an excessive and perverse example of what humans have experienced throughout the centuries and across cultures. Many of Jesus' hearers had only just enough to live on, and there was always the prospect that tomorrow they wouldn't even have that. Most of them would have had perhaps one spare garment, but not more. For them, as with many in today's non-Western world, one disaster—the breadwinner being sick or injured, for example—could mean instant destitution. It was to people like that, not to people worried about affording smart cars and foreign holidays, that Jesus said not to worry. The ones with real reason to worry!

As with so much of his teaching, what Jesus says in today's gospel lesson goes to the heart of the way we are. His counsel is not just to take a breath, to pause, relax, which would I'm certain help. His warnings and commands go deeper, down to the roots of the problem. You see, this wasn't just good advice on how to live a happy, carefree life. This was a challenge to the very center of his audience's world, their sense of themselves and their place in the world.

Let me explain how this is so. Jesus had just finished giving a lovely set of instructions to the disciples about relying on the Holy Spirit when he's interrupted by a stranger asking about settling a dispute he's having with his brother over their inheritance. It would be as if one of you raised your hand in the middle of the sermon and asked if I had any advice to give on how to do estate planning! Jesus was none too pleased at this interruption but he recognized what was going on and immediately offered some warnings about greed in the form of a brief parable.

Now this is a rather unusual parable. Most of Jesus' parables illustrate some aspect of the kingdom, of grace, of salvation. This parable, however, is more generic. In fact, the only character of the parable doesn't appear to have any obvious connection to anything spiritual whatsoever. He's just a rich farmer who has a bumper crop one year.

But then Jesus gets to the parable's punch—the rich man has had a great harvest, so what's the wise thing to do? He saves it, puts some away for a rainy day. He builds some new barns to store all his earnings. It makes sense. It seems the “wise” thing to do. But then God says to the man, “you fool!” Now that response is not what you'd be expecting. By all accounts, as I said, he was doing the prudent thing, the wise thing. He was saving, not wasting his fortune like some prodigal. Yet, God condemns him as a “fool.”

It needs to be pointed out that, biblically speaking, that is a significant word, a pregnant word, one that has a rich meaning in the Bible as a whole. You see, in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, parts of the Psalms), a “fool” was not just someone who acts unwisely, but more specifically someone who fails to notice how the world works and conform himself accordingly. Fools are the ones who spit into the wind, who cut off the branch they're sitting on, who are constantly trying to row their boat against the current because they simply do not pay attention to how life works. Fools are also un-teachable. It's not only that they fail to make good observations regarding what works and what doesn't, fools also refuse to listen when

others point these things out for them. Fools, the old adage has it, are often in error but never in doubt.

The last straw, the ultimate piece of damnable folly, though, is the characteristic expressed in Psalm 14: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Now, what that means is not full-blown atheism in the modern sense of claiming that there is no God in existence anywhere. But rather that there is no God *here*, no one to interfere or judge or make a difference. So, the fool figures, best to enjoy life the fullest. As the rich man in the parable says: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

But then reality sets in. God says to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” This guy had it all figured out. He’d made his fortune, and was going to sit back and enjoy his earnings—he’d earned it, hadn’t he? Only fate, or rather God, had other plans. And so all that he had worked for, that he had saved, that he counted as his desserts, was gone. At the end of the day, he was no better off than the poor man. So what was the point of it all? Vanity of vanities!, the writer of Ecclesiastes declares.

In this respect, the parable is a warning to all of us against greed, against seeking security in our possessions and our wealth, in thinking that prosperity and net worth are really where it all is. Jesus concludes his teaching with a warning against trusting in wealth, in “storing up treasures for ourselves” here on earth and failing to be “rich towards God.” Greed is bad, evil, idolatrous, even, for in serving it, we are trusting in ourselves, in what we’ve wrought with our own hands rather than in God. Wise advice, fully in keeping with the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. And so far as it reminds us affluent Westerners of the dangers of wealth and greed and miserliness, we should take heed.

But I don’t think it goes far enough, really. It doesn’t get at the radical new world that Jesus was proclaiming, the Kingdom of God, and the challenge that it poses to the way things are. I mean, Jesus didn’t just come to tell us how to get along better in life. He came to inaugurate a whole different kind of life!

You see, the question the stranger interrupted Jesus with was about inheritance, which in his day most likely meant land. Yet, he could have just as well have been talking about the whole of inheritance of Israel, the spiritual inheritance that had been handed down to the Jews. To the Jews of Jesus’ day, put upon by unwashed Gentile occupiers, this inheritance—the law, the land, their link to the Lord—was a thing of pride. They alone had been chosen by God, preserved and protected. And so the aim of the Jewish leaders was to remind and reinforce the boundaries between God’s people and everyone else.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed was aimed precisely against that view. Jesus didn’t come to reinforce Israel’s distinctiveness; God, he said, was longing to shower grace and new life on people of every race and place, to invite people of every tribe and tongue to share in the relationship that Israel had with God. The people of Israel, as far as he could see, were in danger of becoming like the man in the story who wanted the security of enough possessions to last him

a long time. The Jews were holding on to their treasure, their relationship with God, hoarding it away in a great big storage unit, figuring their place with God in heaven was secure.

But God's will is entirely counter to that. The kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed, is, at its heart, about God's sovereignty sweeping the world with love and power, so that all humanity—each one made in God's image and each one loved dearly—so that all may relax in the knowledge that God is in control. When Jesus pointed us earlier to the birds of the air and the flowers in the field, he didn't mean to encourage a kind of romantic nature mysticism, but to stimulate serious understanding: God, the creator, loves to give good gifts, loves to give you the kingdom—loves, that is, to bring his sovereign care and restoration right to your own door. Now this wasn't wholly new to Jesus' fellow Jews. Indeed, at the heart of the appeal is a recovery of Israel's original purpose and calling, how God's people are to be a light to the Gentiles, a model and witness to the "the nations of the world," showing them what it means to know God not as a distant and irrelevant force, but as "Father."

This is critical for addressing the problem of anxiety. For, if the gods you worship are distant and removed, then of course you will be worried. You can't help but be anxious. There's no one looking out for you, no one who cares. But if your God is the Father who calls you his child, then we can indeed rest secure, knowing that, come what may, we will be taken care of.

More than that, because we are secure in that relationship, we can be generous in sharing the riches that we have been given. I'm speaking here not just of the wealth, the money, that each of us has, but of the spiritual treasure that we have as a church. Piedmont has a lot to offer, a lot that we can contribute to the people of Madison. Your individual giftings and practical expertise, your heart and your compassion, your love of God and the riches of our theological tradition. These are all treasures, gifts, we've been given to share with others. For all we've done—and this congregation has done a lot—I don't believe that we have fully realized our potential, achieved all that we can, given all that we have. And I'm saddened that I won't get to see that when you do. But I know you will, I've no doubt that you will. You are some of the best people I've had the privilege of ministering with. And I look forward to hearing what God will be doing through you in the years to come.

Indeed, the cure for anxiety, for insecurity, is finding security with God, trusting his graciousness, being grateful for all that He has given us, and finally, ultimately giving to others, sharing with them the riches we have been given.

The poet Samuel Johnson once observed: "It is better to live rich than to die rich." I think that was what Jesus was getting at: better to live richly, sharing the riches of God's blessings with others, than to spend your life worrying about your riches and lose them all in the end anyway. Such is foolishness, and God wants so much more for us than that. May your lives and your common life be so richly blessed and richly lived that others may know the riches of God! Thanks be to God!