

Imaging the Word

The Parable of the Rich Fool



[Jim Janknegt \(American, 1953-\), *The Rich Fool*](#)

The painting of *The Rich Fool* (2007) by Texas artist, Jim Janknegt, is a complex and modern illustration of the parable from Luke, chapter 12. In the parable, a wealthy man decides to build bigger barns to store all of his grain and goods, only to lose his life that very night.

The painting consists of a central panel surrounded by a border of related smaller vignettes. The central image is of two homes, one a more luxurious modern home in which sits a man alone at a large table, the “rich fool” at his ample yet lonely dinner. Across the dinner table from him sits the Angel of Death. Next to this house sits a much smaller and modest one in which resides a family — a mother, father, and six children.

The wealth of the rich man is displayed in his well-appointed home, filled with art and fine furnishings. In the living area across from the dining room, a modern sculpture of a figure with a hole in its center symbolizes the hollowness of a life of abundant possessions. The bedroom upstairs is one in which the rich man sleeps alone, and dreams of a life where he will “relax, eat, drink and be merry.” The landscaping around the wealthy man’s home is well-kept and landscaped but somewhat barren, with cactus plants and large rocks. Reflecting the ominousness of the event, the night sky contains a full haloed moon, shrouded by strips of clouds.

In the painting’s monochromatic border, we see the trappings of modern material prosperity – furnishings, electronics, jewelry, and the like. Ironically, the image on the television screen is a talking head, a skull. In the border are images of side-by-side houses, placed in a sequence of time. In the top left are two nearly comparably-sized houses. Beside this scene in the upper border is another pair, of which one house is being bulldozed to make room for a larger home which the fool will ostensibly fill with all his possessions, similar to how the fool in the story tore down his barn. In the bottom left, we see the home of the rich man after his death, now with a “For Sale” sign in its yard. This is a sale that will in no way profit our fool. Finally, in the bottom right, the two houses remain, only the house formerly owned by the rich fool appears empty, or at least empty of any vestige of its former owner.

Behind the images of the consumer goods, one can just make out phrases from advertising circulars, encouraging us to “Buy One Get One Free,” and to purchase items that are “Essential for Every Home.” In contrast, the parable reminds us that faith is the only matter truly “essential” for every home, and grace, the only commodity that is free.

In a video diary about this painting, Janknegt points to how the family in the other house—whose possessions are few — eats together and is rich in their own company. Their yard is small and strewn with the toys of children at play. In comparison to the spare aesthetic of the rich man’s yard, the house of the family is set against a background of trees, perhaps suggesting the Tree of Life. Thus the two homes stand in contrast — desires versus needs, death versus life, excess versus sufficiency. Janknegt’s painting reminds us that Jesus wishes for us abundance — not abundance of possessions, but a life rich toward God: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).