

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay
July 31, 2022
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 12:13-21

This is quite the parable. You know that with a lot of the parables of Jesus, their meanings need to be teased out and can have a variety of interpretations. As Matt Skinner, the Lutheran New Testament scholar wrote, Parables rarely sit still, and generally cannot be domesticated. Or, they won't submit to our pleasant satisfaction, but are instead meant to perturb us.

Well. I want to say that there is very little disagreement about THIS parable. It's pretty clear what it's saying. Don't just pay attention to filling up your barn for yourself. Period. Under normal procedure, I'm happy to work on a parable through a whole sermon and then come to some zinging conclusion. In this case, I am zinged at the very beginning. In fact, which one of us does not stand accused by Jesus' words? Which one of us does not resemble the certain rich man at least a little? Which one of us would truly like, and need, our fair share of the inheritance?

So allow me to commiserate with all of you who might relate to the rich person. For the first point, savings is a good thing. For most of us, it's not a matter of working until we die. There will come a time when, hopefully, we retire from active work. And at that time, we need enough savings to tide us through the rest of our days. How much of that is enough? Well, we don't know. So we try to save, as much as is possible, mitigated of course by how much we need to spend! But as my friend and economist Shawn said, which I have already quoted, You make your plans, and then things happen. So, savings, not a bad thing. Nor are we ever assured that we have saved enough. Thus, bigger barns.

And we DO live in a capitalist economy, which depends upon continual growth, both in output and in consumption. And we are aided in this project by the advertising sector, which is in turn aided by the fact that we now live so much of our lives online, where our information, habits and preferences are harvested by countless business interests. So we have not only advertising, but TARGETED advertising. How many of us read the privacy agreements of the apps we download? We don't. Did you know that for most of us, there are millions of datapoints about us in the virtual universe that can be sorted and organized by those who want to use that information? Do you know what I'm talking about? And there is very little we can do about it.

In addition, we have been blessed and cursed by something most of us have: desire. Desire to have the latest cool thing. Desire to live a better life. Desire to be respected and accepted. Desire to be both unique and still belong to some group.

There is a reason that the latest national lottery reached over a billion dollars! Because so many people are playing it, because so many people, despite the remote chances of winning, wouldn't mind being the actual recipient! The average American spends \$207 per year on lottery tickets. (Which is less than I would have guessed.). On the other hand, woe to the person who has won that lottery. You probably know stories of how winners have blown through their money in a few years, been hounded by "friends" and family, had to move to another town, been targeted by a hit man, have had their homes robbed multiple times, developed serious mental health issues, been the subject of intense jealousy. Why? From buying a lottery ticket and then having the misfortune of winning.

Jesus said, "Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."

George Carlin, the comic, had a popular routine:

You got your stuff with you? I'll bet you do. Stuff is important.
You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff!

That's all your house is; a place to keep your stuff.
 If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house.
 You could just walk around all the time.

Sometimes acquiring so much stuff leads to what we call hoarding, a somewhat dangerous condition. Some of you may watch TV shows about hoarding. I read about the reasons why people become hoarders. There are very good explanations:

- 1) we're preserving the past (that's why I keep all of my printed sermons);
- 2) we are keeping memories of our loved ones;
- 3) we maybe had a past where we were deprived and we don't want to feel that way again;
- 4) we're guarding ourselves against isolation or loneliness;
- 5) the piles provide physical protection for us;
- 6) you never know if something might be REALLY valuable;
- 7) the corollary, you never know when you're going to need one of those twenty cameras.

These are all VERY GOOD reasons for accumulating stuff. Except that often, they don't work to make us feel better. Or, when they get out of hand, they burden us from living a fuller life.

That's what Jesus was probably getting at in this parable in response to the man in the crowd. It's not just a matter of not being rich toward God, however you might interpret that, but it's that things themselves are not going to make us happy by themselves.

Mary told the story in our Sunday night Zoom gathering about how, after one of our vehicles was stolen from our street, and then, unfortunately, found, having been stripped and damaged beyond reasonable expectation of repair, we needed a new car. Mary knew what needed to be done, so she went to buy a new car. It turned out to be a Nissan Versa hatchback. The red one that you might see in the church parking lot. Nice car. Good purchase. Except that over the short term, Mary became worried that she had paid too much for it, that she hadn't bargained enough. You know how it is with car dealers. She was driving somewhere, mulling over this matter, and praying about it. Did I really pay too much for this car, God? And you

know what? God answered, really! And what God said was, You know, Mary, I really don't care that much about cars.

Well. On the other hand, we CAN get a lot of joy from things. It reminds me of Marie Kondo, who was really popular for a while in her advice about decluttering our lives. She helped our family quite a bit. I still fold my clothes in my drawers the way she advised. It helps! And she said that in deciding whether to keep an item or not, you ask if that item "sparks joy" in you. Objects, things, can be important to us. Pictures, paintings, heirlooms. Favorite clothes, furniture, old possessions. I remember the day Mary and I donated some nice furniture the church rummage sale. One of our parishioners saw the set and was flabbergasted that we would part with the pieces. But in this case, we really had TOO MUCH STUFF.

That is what our upcoming sale is for on October 1st, decluttering our lives. Of course, at the expense of the people who buy the things! Mary volunteers at the Abundance Shop in Los Osos, which is operated by St. Benedict's Episcopal Church. It's a great place, clean, always turning over inventory, staffed by very pleasant people. If you don't go there, you OUGHT to! But only to buy things that you need and that spark joy! (For me, that's jigsaw puzzles.) And maybe make a compact that as things come in the door of your home, other things go out.

The word *wealth* is closely connected with another English word, *well-being*. There is something about wealth that is necessary for our well-being. And seen from a strictly materialist viewpoint, an abundance of things is QUITE A BIT of what helps us to feel well. But from a spiritual viewpoint, from, as Paul puts it in Colossians, from *Christ's* perspective, material things are best when they provide a window into the deeper reality, the deeper truth that we are made as spiritual AND physical beings. That even though all that God made is good and beautiful and beneficial, that in the end, our physical bodies will die. And then our deep selves will emerge.

And then, as the author of Ecclesiastes makes clear, everything that we have will go to others (which I think was bad news because the Teacher was not so clear about life after life).

So how can we negotiate this life of needing things while also being rich toward God?

Here's the best I can understand it at this point. God made the world and all that is within it, making us its stewards. We can be good stewards, living so that future generations can live as well. We can consume sustainably. Maybe fewer things would be a good idea. Maybe that will lead to less production. We've had a taste of that during the pandemic.

Being stewards of the earth, we are also stewards of our possessions. We can acquire what we need, however broadly we want to define those needs. We can be curious about the vast inequalities of wealth and well-being in our world and nation and state and county. We can limit consumption, as much as possible, that leads to a deepening of our blooming climate crisis.

We can share items that can be shared with our neighbors and families. We can seek understanding of the housing crisis in our state and work toward supporting different models of housing, including so-called co-housing. We can explore co-housing for where we live, thus helping to alleviate some pressing modern problems of isolation and loneliness.

We can give money to organizations that alleviate the problems of poverty, or we can give to the person asking for it on the street. We can use our physical strength to help with building and repairing things. We can climb onto efforts that are already happening, or we can find the needs ourselves.

We can buy and cook food for those who don't have the ability to fully feed themselves or have a place where they CAN cook anything. We can glean food from restaurants and grocery stores and take it to people who will receive it. We can deliver meals that have already been cooked to the homebound.

We can clear our storage places. We can hold a give-away sale. We can build local community with a joint party on the street. We can volunteer at a place that ministers to homeless people.

I could go on. I know you will. I know you are. I know that, as you struggle to be generous to God's people, you are already BEING generous. Thank you for that, and for your partnership in the gospel. Thank you for listening to this rambling sermon. Amen.