

Luke 12:13-21 – The Parable of the Rich Fool

I read an article recently that stated that Americans are swamped by how many things we own and how much stuff we have. The article highlighted a recent survey that found that almost 70% of Americans feel like they own too much stuff. This owning too much stuff isn't just bad for how much we must clean and organize; its actively worsening the quality of our lives. A separate survey found that a full 50% of Americans are stressed out by the number of things they own. Yet, year after year Americans find ourselves at the top of the worldwide consumer list, and by a large margin, too, accumulating more and more things, buying more and more stuff.

Even though I am very much one of those 70% of Americans who feels like they own too much, I'm always a little happy to get more. Even though I have way too many t-shirts already, I still love getting that new, free one every year at camp. Even though Bartlee and I have about fifteen Newk's cups in our cabinets, we still take a new one home every time we eat there. There is just something so seductive about getting new things, about accumulating new stuff, something so exhilarating about buying a new item, adding to the collection, keeping up with trends, while also keeping up with the Joneses. But even while seeking the thrill of the new purchase, we continue to find ourselves overwhelmed with our things, bogged down with the amount of stuff that's cluttering out homes and our lives. The question, of course, is what we're trying to accomplish by owning all this stuff, what space are we trying to fill, what thing are we trying to prove, and to whom? Are we using all this stuff only for our own selfish purposes, or are we using it for the betterment of God's creation?

Today's Gospel reading is traditionally known as the Parable of the Rich Fool. It's a harsh title for a difficult lesson from Jesus about how we should view the things we own and what we should do with them. In this parable, we have the story of a man whose business is doing very well. He has land that has produced abundantly, and because of this, he finds himself with a hefty surplus, perhaps even a small fortune. In fact, he has so much that the barns he currently has built cannot contain his new harvest. He consults with himself and decides that he will tear these smaller barns down, build bigger ones, and store up the harvest for the future. Then, when all that work is done, he will finally be secure enough in his own abundance that he can "relax, eat, drink, and be merry."

God, of course, knows this man will never be able to follow through on his plans. He'll never have that bigger barn, never store up the crops his land has so abundantly yielded, never reach the point where he can fall into the safety and peace he believes his things will buy him. That very night, God knows, he will lose his life, and all the things he's so carefully collected and planned for will be for naught, left to others to use as they see fit.

This is a difficult parable for us to grapple with. Is Jesus telling us it's bad to save things? Is Jesus telling us that planning for the future is foolish? Of course the answer to those questions is no, Jesus is not telling us that saving or prudent planning for the future is in itself foolish. But Jesus is calling us to sincerely look at our relationship with our things, with our resources, and our money, and to discern whether how we view and use those things lines up with the way God is calling us to use them.

Parables give us glimpses into the Kingdom of God, stories that Jesus tells us to help us better understand who God is calling us to be and how God is calling us to live. Often, they turn our preconceived notions about how the world should work on its head and call us to pay better attention to the ways that the kingdoms of this world are so very different from the kingdom God wants us to be about building up.

This is another one of Jesus' parables about money and possessions. Anywhere from a third to half of the parables that Jesus tells in some way connect back to our goods, wealth, money, and/or the accumulation of those things. This is not by accident, friends. Jesus knows how very hard it is for us to be in good, right relationship with our goods and our money. He warns about the dangers of placing too big an emphasis on our wealth over and over again in the Gospels. He warns, too, about how sneaky and insidious our love of money can be, how despite our very best efforts, the love of money and things and goods can still worm its way into our hearts and souls and slowly take over our lives, poisoning us from the inside out.

The man in Jesus' parable finds himself in just such a position. Jesus doesn't paint him to a bad person, nothing in this parable suggests that he's manipulative or that he gained his wealth from dishonest practices. He's just a man who's done well enough at his job, whose been lucky enough to have land that has produced well.

Of course, it takes almost no time at all for his wealth, his goods, his abundance to start overwhelming him, to start crowding out other things in his life. He cares nothing for others in his planning for the future – in fact the only two characters in his inner dialogue are himself and the things he now possesses. He doesn't stop to consider the poor in his planning. He doesn't even stop to consider his own family or friends or

neighbors. There is only room in his mind for his newfound things. Already, in no time at all, this man is possessed by his possessions, enamored with what he believes they can buy him – peace, relaxation, safety, security, and a good, sweet enjoyable life.

The reader, of course, gets the sense that even if he had lived long enough to have his plans come to fruition, the life he would have found himself living might not have been as fulfilling as he thinks. There's something hollow to his plans. They are too self-serving, too self-assured, and too self-centered to lead to much lasting happiness.

Beneath all of this is the larger, perhaps more uncomfortable truth that all of us have to face, that no matter what we accrue, no matter how much we store up for ourselves, we can never truly be the masters of our lives, that we can never truly buy lasting safety or security or relaxation. We can never own so much that the challenges and changes and chances of life won't reach us or affect us. Only in God and God's promises that we are loved and cared for, now and always, can we find true security and safety and peace. It's a free gift, God's love, that nothing we buy or build for ourselves or plan hard enough for can earn us. But if we're not careful, the constant, insidious drive for more and more things can tempt us to put our faith and trust in our own goods and forget about the gifts that God so freely offers.

In parable after parable, Jesus invites us to consider our relationship with our things, our resources, our money – are we in good, right relationship with it? Do we see it as part of the large way in which we are called to build of the kingdom of God? Are we generous? Jesus calls us to be trusting enough, both of God but also of each other, to hold our stuff lightly, to not hoard it, but to use it rightly in the building up of God's kingdom on earth.