

When I was in my late 20's living outside of Washington DC I purchased the book Financial Management for Dummies. This was the mid 90's and the dummy books were all the rage. I had two master's degrees, a Master of History and a Master of Divinity, but very little formal financial education. 10 years of college, graduate school, and seminary left me with more educational and consumer debt than I could easily handle. I found it challenging to keep up with all my bills and impossible to save. As a newly ordained priest I didn't make much money and lived in an expensive part of the world. I couldn't figure out how to improve my financial situation and was too ashamed to ask for help, so I bought a book.

True confession here. I never made it passed the first chapter: *Getting out of debt: Spending less than you make*. I tried to move on to other chapters, but each chapter had a warning at the top. If you spend more than you make return to chapter one.

It turned out to move past chapter one I needed to live in a less expensive part of the world and make more money. By the time I mastered the lesson and could spend less than I made on a consistent basis I'd lost the book. Spending less than I made and saving for retirement was easier when I made more money than I needed to pay for the basics of life.

My life in my 20's and 30's would have made a parable that everyone could understand if not necessarily sympathize with: "the over educated graduate student who spent more than she made"

Spend less than you make is a life lesson that rolls off the tongue of financial advisors, educators, parents & politicians.

The parable of the rich fool. Well now that's going ... as the saying goes ...from preaching to meddling.

The rich farmer is no fool to our collective American psyche - he is our hero - our hope, our dream for ourselves, our children, and grandchildren.

The farmer worked hard and was blessed with good weather and good land. The farmer was not a criminal. Jesus made no mention of graft, manipulating the market, theft, or mistreatment of workers. Instead, he described an industrious, wise, prudent, hard-working farmer. The American dream. Work hard - invest wisely - secure a nice nest egg for yourself, retire early, eat, drink, and be merry. What's foolish about that? I'm sure the author of financial management for dummies would give the farmer an A+ for sound financial planning.

Yet Jesus begins and ends his parable with a challenge: *Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, your life does not consist of your possessions... You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have*

*prepared, whose will they be?' So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."*

The message of the parable of the rich farmer with a barn full of goods seems obvious. Don't be greedy. Material possessions can't save you.

But as biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine points out we frequently miss the point and lose the genius of Jesus' teaching if we stop with easy interpretations.

Parables are designed to help us ask the right questions rather than provide easy answers: Today's parable asks us to consider among other things:

How are we to live in community?

How we determine what really matters?

How we figure out what life God wants us to live?

Keeping those questions in mind let us return to today's parable: A man asked Jesus to intervene in a family inheritance dispute. A common role for a Rabbi. But, Jesus wise as ever, refused to choose sides and instead told a story....

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, '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 goods laid up for

many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

I've read and preached many interpretations of this parable. Most boil down to this: the farmer's wealth isn't the problem...it's his selfishness. I will...I will...I will... I will. The farmer has several *I will's* in a very short story. No reference to anyone else's opinion. No mention of anyone's happiness. Only his own seem to matter.

And that is one way of reading the parable. A way many of us need to hear often: Don't get consumed with your possessions. Don't think only of yourself. Don't assume that just because you have a barn full of stuff that you will be happy. Don't be rich in things and poor in God. Don't horde all your wealth for yourself.

Having recently retired from full time work because I'm blessed with a pension as well as investment income I know that telling someone to share rather than store up wealth is about as helpful as telling someone in debt to simply spend less than they make. Both of those things are good and holy. It's wise to spend less than you make. It's good for you soul and for the world to share rather than horde wealth. But knowing that doesn't necessarily lead to changes in behavior.

Rather than giving you a simple answer for what this parable means I'm going to leave you with some questions to ponder.

What gives your life meaning?

What brings you peace?

Is it the goods you have stored up or something else?

What does it mean to you to be rich in God?

If you knew you only had a few days left to live what would you do with that time and possessions?

Who/what would you consider in making that decision?

Or more succinctly: What's in your barn and what are you doing with it?

This week live with the parable of the rich and foolish farmer and see what emerges. Let his story seep into your heart, soul, and mind and ponder the questions it raises for you because the questions may be just as important as your answers.