

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43

Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

What Luke has to say about wealth, possessions, just might make us a bit uneasy. He writes about how people use their riches to enhance their own status and use wealth lavishly to enjoy their own positions in life. Mary, the mother of Jesus, first revealed God's negative attitude toward the rich and lofty, when she declared in what has become known as the Magnificat:

He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.

She declares there will be a reversal of the rich and the poor. Jesus also shares a negative attitude about wealth in the book of Luke. It is in Luke where we find Jesus telling the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. Once he had given everything away, then he could come and follow Jesus. "Jesus [also] ... said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'" There is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived a luxurious life, who dressed in fine clothes and ate scrumptious food. Lazarus was a poor man, covered with sores, who laid at the gate of the rich man, wishing he had the very crumbs that fell from the rich man's dining table. The poor man died and was carried by the angels. The rich man died, and lived a life of torment in Hades. Nothing is said about why these men went where they did, but there is the implication. What do we make of these troubling passages? Jesus is using hyperbole here, is he not? Surely Jesus did not mean all that he said here.

Our passage this morning is another one that may make us uncomfortable. This parable is known as the parable of the rich fool. A farmer's land has produced abundantly. His barns could not hold it all. One Bible commentator declares that this man is not a simple farmer with a small plot of land. Rather, he controls much of the agricultural produce over an entire region. He was a man of means. He comes up with a grand idea. He will tear them down, and build larger ones. He tells himself that he has enough grain to keep him going for years. This guy has got it made. Relax, eat, drink, be merry. Wouldn't we all like that lifestyle? That very night God declares him a fool and he dies. There is an irony in what he said, for he echoes Isaiah 22:13, where we read, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

Let's take a look at what started this conversation. The passage begins with someone asking Jesus to mediate between this man and his brother about a dispute over the inheritance. Disputes over inheritance. That is nothing new. I have seen people at their worst when it comes to an inheritance. Years ago, back in Iowa, a funeral director asked me to be a witness. He removed the ring from the deceased woman's finger, placed the ring in a small cloth bag, gave the bag with the ring to a family member, and asked me to sign a document that I witnessed it. The family was fighting over who would get the ring. We saw this in my own family. My paternal grandmother did not get any farm land as did some of her brothers and sisters from her parents, and there were bad feelings about that.

These stories do not tell us that there is anything inherently wrong with wealth. There is nothing wrong with wealth in and of itself. You might know the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. His brothers had sold him to slave traders who took him to Egypt.

Joseph rose in power in Egypt, a Hebrew who worked in the Pharaoh's court. Eventually, he was second only to the Pharaoh. Joseph's job was to store the grain from seven years of abundant crops so that there would be food to eat the following seven years when there would be drought. When he was reunited with his brothers years later, he declared that God meant for his brothers to sell him into slavery. It was all a part of God's plan, so that he would end up in Pharaoh's court, administer the storage and distribution of food, and eventually saved his family from starvation for the drought was also in Israel. There was a positive precedent for storing grain. We may ask what is so wrong with storing an abundance of crops. Frugal-minded folks have long stashed excess food in silos, and supplies in pantries and basement shelves. Many have saved for rainy days, squirreled away funds for retirement, and even secreted dollar bills under mattresses. Is this not a prudent hedge against future economic uncertainty? We are advised to have so much money in savings for an emergency.

Saving for future material needs is one component of proper stewardship of God's bounty. But this rich man is no Joseph. Joseph wisely discerned the times and acted appropriately for the benefit of others, for the benefit of those who would be in need. His was a communal concern. But the rich fool had no intention of selling or sharing his crops at this point in time. He will tear down the old grain bins and build new ones, enabling him to store more for himself. His focus was solely inward. Our concern for the future should be balanced with the injunction to care for one's neighbor, to care for the poor and the marginalized. The rich fool did not return to God and care for his neighbors mainly because he was so focused on himself. He has forgotten the God who was the source of his bounty and the neighbor who had no access to God's bounty.\

We all have heard stories of greed. Leona Helmsley, now a billionaire, sued to get the bulk of her late son's estate. That left his kids with less than \$500 each. Isn't there a name for someone like that? Former Philippines first lady Imelda Marcos took tax money from people who could barely afford food and then used it to buy lavish parties, a yacht and thousands of shoes. She needed them, she said, because she had to change clothes a lot. Haiti's even poorer. Yet while people here were starving, Haiti's rulers, the Duvaliers - they called him Baby Doc - lived in this palace and spent millions shopping... .

Jesus concludes this parable about the rich fool, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Here is the final, fatal outcome for one whose life was the abundance of their possessions. While our particular passage does not tell us what being rich toward God entails, both prior and subsequent passages in Luke provide clear insights. Being rich toward God entail using one's resources for the benefit of one's neighbor in need, as the Samaritan did. Being rich toward God includes intentionally listening to Jesus' word, as Mary did, the passage we looked at last Sunday. Being rich toward God consists of prayerfully trusting that God will provide for the needs of life. Being rich toward God involves selling possessions and giving alms as a means of establishing a lasting treasure in heaven.

I'll conclude with these words of Richard Carlson, a Lutheran New Testament scholar:

The man in the parable and people who emulate his pattern of life are fools for leading isolated, self-absorbed lives, because everything they have given themselves ends with death. Life is not had by the possessions one has. Life and possessions are a gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion, precisely for those who lack resources to provide for themselves.

There is a sense of fulfillment that comes when we share our abundance.

In the name of Christ, our all in all.