

Freed to Give
Luke 12:13-21
8/4/19

I want to read to you one phrase again from the gospel reading for today.

“ . . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

I imagined what a walk through my own home would be like with that phrase ringing in my ears. Pulling into the garage and viewing the assorted tools and supplies stored there. Walking into the home to see the furniture – nothing fancy, but plenty of places to sit. Walk into the kitchen to see cabinets filled with food and a packed refrigerator. Again, nothing fancy, but still plenty of stuff. My closet and dresser with plenty of clothes. And let’s not forget my office at the church with lots of books – that’s the kind of barns ministers like to build.

I know I’m not the only one. Most of us, if we put our lives up against this statement, would find ourselves struggling to justify what we have.

“ . . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Or perhaps we could consider a 21st century paraphrase of this statement.

“ . . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of electronic devices and of apps on our phones to run our lives or entertain us.”

We like to associate hoarding with the reality TV shows where someone has gotten the attention of the health department. But hoarding is not just about having so much you become a public nuisance. Hoarding is an accumulation of things or money far beyond what is needed. That is always at the expense of others.

“ . . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

You would be hard pressed to find a phrase that more clearly indicts our American lifestyle. We love our possessions, our creature comforts, our games, our sports equipment, our clothes, our craft supplies, our books, our electronic devices.

That makes us uncomfortably like the rich man in our parable. He already had plenty. And then he experienced a windfall. That year his fields produced a bumper crop, so much so he was left with a problem. What was he to do with so much?

Audrey West rightly calls our attention to how the man thinks about all this. The pronouns are illuminating. “. . . my crops . . .”, “. . . my barns . . .”, “. . . my grain . . .”, “. . . my goods . . .”, “. . . my soul . . .” He believed he achieved success in life by dint of his smarts and his efforts.

He was the “self-made” man that we epitomize in American capitalism. He had wealth in the form of crops and he had plenty of possessions – those are also mentioned in his barn building.

Notice we see no mention of family. This man appears to be by himself in life. He has his crops. He has his barns. He has his stuff. He probably owns slaves and has some hired servants, but he has no one who he cares about and no one, evidently, who cares about him. If he does have children, they will likely sell his crops and his barns and move with on with their own lives without too much thought.

Our wealthy landowner is an extreme case. We might be tempted to say, well that’s a warning for other folks. You may think your barns full, but not overflowing. We may be correct in thinking we are not as bad as this landowner. But Jesus is telling this story as a warning and as invitation.

We may be tempted to read God’s words in this story as judgment for his greed. I think that’s incorrect. God is not saying, since you have not treated this blessing properly, I will smite you down. No, God calling the man a fool is a lament. “You had all this stuff and rather than doing good with it and using in ways that blessed others and blessed you, you focused solely on accumulating and guarding. You fool, you wasted your life and all that you had been given and now it’s too late to change.”

There’s the warning. Life is given us for a time. We must not let it slip by and waste our time and we shouldn’t waste the blessings God has given us.

The invitation we can access if we rework the statement about possessions.

“. . . one’s life should consist in the sharing of the blessings of abundance we receive from God.”

We are freed to give, to share, to enjoy with others the incredible abundance that God pours into our world. Life is not a grasping, groping, fighting for the last scrap on the table. Life is a table spread with plenty by God. We are invited to the table and we are expected to invite others to the table.

This invitation fits so well with our approach to this table. When we come here, we are not coming to just get food for our bellies. This is not a “my table, my bread, my wine kind of moment.” This is the Lord’s table the invitation is to the world. To the rich. To the poor. To the healthy. To the infirmed. To the well feed. To the hungry. To the citizen. To the refugee. To the straight. To the gay. To every person from every tribe and every nation.

There is plenty of biblical support for us caring for our resources and wise investing and for planning for the future. But with that wisdom, the Bible invites us to use our resources wisely in ways that allow us to share generously. There is such joy awaiting us when we do that. We

are freed to give. When we exercise this freedom, we experience love and we see the lives of others transformed!

What if we rewrite our parable?

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 throw a party for the many people in my household who helped me get this abundance. And I will invite my neighbors and all my tenants and share this wealth with them for they had a part in this. And I will go out on the roadway into town and give gifts to all who beg for they are not so fortunate. The barns I have are enough and perhaps they are too full. I will pull out some of my goods I am not using and give those away.”

And God said, “That is a wonderful idea! This night after your party and your giving, you and I will meet and I will be able to tell you, ‘You finally understood what was important. Well done! You will be remembered for many years to come and your blessings will flow and multiply to so many others beyond your imagining!’”

We are certainly surrounded in this place by witnesses to that approach to life. We have things like lights and a beautiful garden and a parking lot and a handicap entrance because members have understood the blessings of life are meant to be shared. We have incredibly faithful givers who support our budget and make our ministry possible. Our endowments make it possible for us to do so much that lies beyond the reach of our budgets. I know this community has also been incredibly blessed by members who have been generous with the abundance they have enjoyed.

“. . . one’s life should consist in the sharing of the blessings of abundance we receive from God.”

Go home and see about emptying the barns a bit. Give away some goods, some possession you don’t need. When a blessing comes your way, make the blessing of others the priority and building of barns the last. Take stock of the barns full of wealth and share some of that. God gives us abundant blessing to free us from the tyranny of stuff and the prison of greed. We are freed to give. Let us continue to be generous with our friends, our families, our church, and our community. Amen.