

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Colossians 3:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Luke 12:13-21
August 4, 2013
David H. Teschner

This parable is told by Chaya Sarah Silberberg:

For as long as anyone could remember, there was a clock mounted high up on the tallest building in town. As people went about their business throughout the day, they would periodically glance upward, and then automatically check their own watches. Sometimes there would be an inconsistency, and then they would reset their watches to the correct time.

But times change. A murmur of discontent was heard in an element of the population. "The clock is so high –it's a pain in the neck (quite literally!) to always have to look up at it. Why can't the clock be lower down, at eye level, more accessible?"

"What if the clock is wrong? It's practically impossible to change it. Now, if it were installed on a lower building, it would be so much easier to fix."

So a town meeting was called; a decision was made. The clock was lowered.

Then a funny thing started happening. When people noticed a discrepancy between the town clock and their watches, more often than not, they would now adjust the time... on the town clock. "After all, I know that I have the right time..." Then someone else would come by and re-adjust the clock... within a short period of time, the clock had been fiddled with so often that it broke down. The consensus then became that it was no longer relevant, not worth fixing, and the clock was consigned to the trash heap.

Of course, this parable is about bringing a reigning standard of measurement down from its once previously held, high standard. We've done that with a lot of things, haven't we? Many of God's standard values are under attack as well, including, and perhaps, most importantly, our perspective regarding wealth.

As we've said before, wealth itself isn't the problem, but how we as individual value it and handle it. The man in the parable Jesus tells today is not faulted because he is wealthy. He is already rich, we're told, when his land produces abundantly.

Notice in his dialogue with himself the number of times he uses "I" or "my." Herein lies his problem. He thinks his good fortune is all his doing. Did he prepare the soil, sow the seed, secure ample sun and rain and then harvest it all himself? He has lost the capacity to see that God and nature and probably many hired hands contributed to his windfall. He excludes from his vocabulary "we" and "ours" or "theirs."

What else could he have done with his bumper crop other than tear down perfectly good barns to build larger ones?

First of all, he could have been thankful for seasonable weather. He could also have returned thanks by returning the obligatory tithe of 10 percent as prescribed by Jewish Law. He could have made a contribution to a food pantry; given his laborers a well-deserved bonus and/or thrown a lavish party for the community to celebrate his ample harvest.

Some of you remember Phil Kirkpatrick, Cyrus's younger brother. He died several years ago now. He was a very committed and joyful Christian man who served in many helpful capacities in the church and community. Every so often, Phil would pop into my office unexpectedly with a cheerful countenance, and he'd say, "Just wanted to stop by and bring a check for the church."

He would go on to explain that he'd just won some money on a lottery ticket, or from the sale of stocks that had done well, or some payment for a consultation he'd recently performed. You see in addition to his pledge of 10 percent, Phil brought a tenth of any excess income he earned or received as well. Phil held to a high standard regarding his wealth. At least 10 percent went first to the church.

I know that tithing is not practical for everyone, especially if college tuitions loom in the future, but we can be committed to working toward it little by little each year. More important than the actual amount is our attitude toward our wealth and possessions. Jesus, as well as others, promoted a generous spirit. The man in the parable, as I said earlier, is not condemned for being wealthy but for hoarding his wealth and using it to serve only himself. Happiness and true riches come from the freedom "to give and give and give again what God has given us." (Hymn 9)

In the early part of the 20th century, then President Woodrow Wilson, said, "Unless civilization is redeemed spiritually, it cannot endure materially." Or in the words of another of our great hymns, we need to "shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul." (594 God of grace and God of glory)

To be rich toward God, then, we need to cultivate a bumper crop of thanksgiving, benevolence and stewardship.

Garrison Keillor was recently in Richmond bringing his popular "Prairie Home Companion" radio show to Byrd Park. While we associate him with Midwest Lutheranism, in 2006 he said in an interview that he had joined an Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Maybe it was because of an experience he had in an Episcopal Church he visited once in New York City. This is what he wrote about that initial visit.

"Our clear picture of Episcopalians was of wealthy people, Yale graduates, worshipping God in extremely good taste. Episcopalians were the church in wingtips, the church of scotch and soda.

So when I moved to New York and walked into Holy Apostles, I was surprised to see no one in suits. Nobody was well dressed. A congregation of a hundred souls on lower Ninth Avenue, a church with no parking lot, which was in need of paint, and the sanctuary ceiling showed water damage but which managed (I learned later) to support and operate a soup kitchen that fed a thousand New Yorkers every day, more than a million to date.

Black faces in the sanctuary, old people, exiles from the Midwest, the lame and the halt, divorced ladies, gay couples – a really good anthology of the faith. I felt glad to be there. When we stood

for prayers, bringing slowly to mind the goodness and the poverty of our lives, the lives of others, the life to come, it brought tears to your eyes, the simple way the Episcopalians pray.

The simple way we pray and the simple way we give are what we'll forever be remembered for in Petersburg. Amen.