

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Colossians 3:1-11, Psalm 107, Luke 12:13-21
July 31, 2016
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Larry Jones' barn burned down, and Susan, his wife, called the insurance company. Susan told the agent, "Our barn burned down, and I want the \$50,000 that we insured it for.

The agent said, "Now wait a minute; it doesn't exactly work that way. We will come by, ascertain the value of the old barn and provide you with a new one of comparable worth."

Susan was silent for a long time. She finally spoke and said to the agent, "If that is the way these insurance policies work, then I'd like to cancel the policy on my husband."

This funny story connects with the parable Jesus told about a man with barns, but doesn't exactly address the issue of greed, or does it?

Jesus tells the parable this morning in response to a man who feels that he isn't getting his fair share of a family inheritance from his brother. Jesus chooses not to play Judge Judy in this case, but assumes that one brother or the other is immorally motivated by greed. This provides an opportunity for a teaching moment to the assembled crowd.

A rich man with a large farm has a bumper crop. There must have been just the right combination of rain and sunshine during that particular growing season. The man, who obviously seeks his own counsel, asks himself, "What should I do now since my present barn capacity cannot possibly hold this overabundance?"

We learn a good deal about this man in the following conversation he has with himself. What is most striking is the amount of times he uses either "I" or "my." In fact, within three sentences, he uses "I" six times and "my" five times.

Is it fair to say that the rich man is a tad bit self-absorbed? And he is under the misconception that everything he has or gets is his – my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods and my soul.

There is absolutely no recognition that his good fortune from a one-time abundant yield and previously existing wealth could have come from anyone but himself. There is no gratitude to God for seasonable weather or for all the helpers who were undoubtedly needed to plant and harvest his fields and fill his barns.

The rich man is not depicted as a bad man, but he clearly has no higher guiding principle to help him decide what to do with his excess other than to hoard it for himself alone.

It's been said that owning possessions is not the problem unless they begin to own us. Jesus didn't necessarily object to wealth, but he saw how often it could easily become a distraction from what really mattered. Isn't it interesting that we call stocks and bonds "securities." Have you ever noticed how insecure and fretful we become when stock or bond prices start plummeting?

I knew a man who was quite wealthy. After he retired and had a few health problems, he spent all day watching the TV station that had the stock prices scrolling across the top. What a sad, sad way to live out your final years being consumed with how one's wealth was fairing day to day. It's a shame he didn't sit around thinking about ways to put his investments to good use on behalf of others.

A major emphasis of this year's if not every year's presidential election centers on the question of security. Which candidate, which party, will keep me the safest and the most well off? Let's face it, these are important, but if these are our only or primary criteria for choosing a leader, perhaps we are not much better than the man in the parable. We are in it for ourselves.

St. Paul, writing to the Philippians, says, "For I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty, and of being in need. I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:11-13) Emphasis on Christ.

And in the letter from Colossians, we heard, "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Emphasis on "above."

The story is told of a master who sat in prayerful meditation on a riverbank. A disciple approached him and placed two enormous pearls at his feet as tokens of his reverence and devotion for the master. The master opened his eyes, lifted up one of the pearls, and held it so carelessly that it slipped out of his hands and rolled into the river. The horrified disciple immediately plunged headfirst into the water and proceeded to search the river bottom for several hours without any luck.

Finally, all wet and exhausted, he roused the master from his meditation and said to him, "You saw where it fell in. Show me the exact spot so I can retrieve it for you." The master lifted the other pearl, threw it in the river and said, "Right there!"

There is a Roman proverb which says, "Money is like seawater. The more you drink, the more thirsty you become." Amassing wealth and possessions can become an addiction.

From Science 101, we all learned that plants take in carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. Animals take in oxygen and give off carbon dioxide. It is the necessary cycle of exchange at the very core of our existence. Another cycle at the core of our existence is receiving and passing on money in exchange for goods and services. When we hoard wealth like the man in the parable, it doesn't get passed on so everyone can grow and breathe freely.

The man in today's parable isn't faulted for having plenty. His mistake was thinking that he was the sole source of his abundance. He forgot a fundamental higher guiding principal:

"All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee."

"Praise God from whom all blessing flow."

Even his own soul, as he found out, was not truly his own.

What does it mean to be rich toward God then? H. King Oehmig writes, "The gospel provides an answer. Wealth toward God increases and is most fulfilling in those who follow Jesus. And with this true 'wealth' comes a kind of detachment that neither disdains the good things of this life, nor selfishly covets them. Rather, it holds them lightly, letting them slip through open fingers to drift into the barns and lives of others." AMEN.