

Relax. Eat. Drink. Be Merry.
Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ Jesus said to him, “Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?” ¹⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.”

¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: “A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. ¹⁷ He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! ¹⁸ Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. ¹⁹ I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?’ ²¹ This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.”

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We shared some entertaining inheritance stories together on Wednesday night. The first story occurred back when a dollar filled your grocery sack and a horse carried you to the store. Someone’s great granddaddy died and left \$25 to his son and a dollar to each of the girls. The girls had husbands, you see, and great granddaddy figured they would provide for his daughters. Misogyny notwithstanding, at least that decision came with an explanation. No one could ever explain why when it came to the horse and wagon, granddaddy gave the horse to his son and the wagon to his nephew. Perhaps it was spite; for what good is a wagon without a horse?

The next story about inheritance divided was about a garage bequeathed to two brothers. The elder brother wanted the shop for a place to tinker in his retirement; the younger brother wanted to sell the shop to fund his retirement. A peaceable resolution was not achieved, so the brothers built a wall. They divided the building in two and kept their malice whole. But at least they kept it to themselves.

Some families end up in court trying to convince a judge that mom was senile when she left the house to sister; dad was out of his right mind when brother had him sign the papers. Vitriol gets filtered through family lawyers, and holiday reunions are sacrificed for third-party arbitration. And for what? How does one rationalize a dividing wall? Equality? Fairness? Justice? Is so much strife justified by a “right and reasonable share”?

These must have been the self-justifying thoughts of the young man who confronted Jesus from the crowd. “I will get my fair share. It’s only right. The law affords me one-third of the property and I demand justice.” He puffed himself up with thoughts of vindication. “I will get what is rightfully mine...Teacher! Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!”

How startling it is, even for the church today, when Jesus speaks to us directly. When he peers through our self-deception, parts the veil of our entitlement, and looks us right in the eyes and says, no. No. What you think is fair fractures families; what you think is just establishes strife; what

you mistake as equality is actually greed. The Lord does not see as you see. I will have no part in your struggle. Can you imagine how the young man swooned in the heat of the crowd at the scorching words of his teacher? His rationale shattered like a mirror, flashes of piercing light dancing behind his eyes. The brilliant light of truth is disorienting to minds that have indulged in the darkness of self-deception.

Jesus spoke truth, “Watch out! Guard yourselves against all kinds of greed. For one’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.” Wealth, especially a large lump sum acquired all at once, can make us myopic, unable to see the big picture. Our focus turns toward the wealth, keeping the wealth, protecting the wealth, preserving the wealth. We forget that we existed just a day before without the wealth, and we fear the time that will inevitably arrive, when we will once again be without the wealth. Forgetfulness and fear can overwhelm gratitude and generosity if we are not diligent.

Take this landowner for instance:

Jesus tells us there was once a very rich man (not a farmer mind you, a land owner) who had barns overflowing with produce. That sounds like good news! But the wealthy landowner became so consumed with the unexpected wealth that it was like nothing else existed. He said, “What will I do with MY harvest? I will store all MY grain in bigger barns. I will say to MYSELF, take it easy.” The man possessed the wealth of the land as if it was his sole effort that brought it forth.

- He forgot about the acres and acres of rich soil that had been handed down to him from generations before.
- He never marveled at the mystery of the sun beckoning tiny seeds to sprout from the earth with warmth and light. He never gave thanks to God for the essential rain that falls on the good and evil alike.
- The farmer ignored the swarming life that enriched his fields, the worms and the beetles, the fungi and bacteria.
- It was like he never saw the hovering bees and the beautiful butterflies that floated from flower to flower pollinating the plants that produced “his” bounty.
- He forgot, most disturbingly, the men and women who worked in the fields, who labored in the sweltering sun to nurture the crops and bring the harvest home.
- He forgot to mentor his sons, the two boys who would become inheritors and stewards of the land.
- And at last, he forgot to look out for the hungry people in his neighborhood. With grain stored up for years, he did nothing to remember those who hunger today.

This destitute farmer, surrounded by beauty and treasures, was consumed by a surplus of wealth.

As Jesus tells it, God came to him and said, “Fool, tonight you will die.” Reading the Greek text, we see that Jesus was playing with words. The very last thing the farmer says is, “I will...

Relax. Eat, drink, and be full.” God responds, “You fool!” It is a scathing pun. The landowner is foolish for thinking his bigger barns will make him full and happy in the future.

It is a foolishness we are familiar with. “Here’s what I will do,” the farmer said, “I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I will store all my grain and goods.”¹⁹ I will say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.” I will, I will, I will, before the grain is in the barns, the farmer daydreams about a day when he will own be bigger barns, when he will have more money, when his life will be happier.

Professor Brian Mahan calls this kind of daydreaming “chasing after ourselves”. We do it so often, we might not even be aware that it’s happening. “Chasing after ourselves” is like playing dress up in our minds. We take this model of our self and we imagine it to be fifteen pounds skinnier and more energetic. We dress it up in nicer cloths, put it in a bigger truck or a newer car, and image that this self has just been recognized for some sort of outstanding professional achievement (like his sermons have been compiled into a best-selling book) and that that success results in a sudden influx of wealth. Then we take this idealized model and we push it down the road, thinking to ourselves, when I catch it I’ll be happy then. As Brian says, “We do not wish to be awakened from the purposeful distraction of chasing stylized images of ourselves in the future.” We are like a landowner, content to dream of bigger barns and a future day when we will be full.

It was not only the landowner’s self chasing that proved to be unwise; it was also his relationship to stuff, temporary goods. The Greek sentence that the Common English Bible translates “tonight you will die” more literally translates “They demand your soul from you.” Who are the “they” that demand the life of the rich landowner? It could be God, most certainly, but it could also be the crops the farmer has stored up. “Fool,” God says to the rich man who is standing up to his nose in wheat, “the very treasures you have stored up for yourself, they demand your life from you.” We hear other echoes of Jesus in this parable:

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.”

“What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit their souls?”

Our souls are jeopardized by an inordinate love of wealth. Our relationship with stuff is a spiritual issue.

At the same time, however, it is important to realize our bodies are also imperiled by an excessive love of stuff. Surely it isn’t too difficult for the American mind to imagine how an abundance of cheap food or excessive consumption of entertainment could literally kill a body. We are up to our ears in corn and technology, and they are literally demanding our lives from us. Be on guard, Jesus warns, for “this is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.”

These are hard words from Jesus. So often we are like the young brother in the crowd, coming to Jesus to be justified in our actions, to find an advocate for the way we live, an affirming and encouraging word. But we need to hear a parable like this every now and then. We need Jesus to pluck us from the crowd, look us right in the eye, and tell us an unsettling truth. Stop. Stop

chasing, stop striving, stop making strife, just stop...and look around. A wealth of good gifts surrounds you.

Here is a community that loves you, a family that nurtures you and cares for you. The sun is shining, the sparrows are singing, and even the lilies are dressed in the splendor of God. You have food for today and a place to call home. God has been rich toward you. Relax.

All the happiness you need can be found in this moment. Relax. Eat with one another in gratitude, drink up the blessing of today and share it with your neighbor. Relax and be full *today*.

Amen.