

Eighth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "You Can't Take It with You"  
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21  
July 30-31, 2022  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker, "We're out spending our children's inheritance"? I guess the parents of the fellow who asks Jesus' help probating his father's will had never seen it, because they clearly left something behind to be divided between their children! Jesus says he won't touch that family minefield with a ten foot pole, and then He cautions:

*"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15, NRSV)*

The alternate translation in *The Message* is:

*"Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."*

To drive home the point, Jesus goes on to tell a parable, one of those earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. I've seen it called both the Parable of the Rich Fool and the Parable of the Greedy Farmer. It's apparently been a great growing season and this guy is harvesting crops hand over fist, to the point he's running out of storage space. What's a rich fool, what's a greedy farmer to do?? Give the bumper crops to the ecumenical food pantry at Manasquan Pres? Sell them and give the money to Family Promise or the Furniture Bank or Interfaith-RISE or Lutheran World Relief? No, no, no. He plans to tear down his Mama Bear-sized silo and put up a Papa Bear-sized one. "Look, everyone, how clever and successful I am!" Again, in *The Message* paraphrase:

*'Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!'*

Uh oh.

<sup>20</sup> *"Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?'" [Then Jesus gives the moral of the story.]*

<sup>21</sup> *“That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”*

If our success is honest and not earned at others’ expense, that’s fine. And God has nothing against building projects. But this guy’s attitude is “Mine! All mine!” He doesn’t have an internal meter that registers, “Enough,” a switch that flips and converts the accumulation of wealth to the sharing of wealth.

“Eat, drink, and be merry” is one of those phrases people quote without even realizing it comes from the Bible. “Eat, drink, and be merry” was also an actual epitaph on people’s gravestones during Jesus’ time. So when the Rich Fool, the Greedy Farmer, is yucking it up and boasting, *“Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry,”* he’s ironically writing his own epitaph....

*“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”*

(Luke 12:20-21, NRSV)

There’s a strong echo here of this weekend’s first lesson from Ecclesiastes:

*I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I have toiled and used my wisdom under the sun.... (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19)*

Of course neither Scripture passage is suggesting we spend it all while we can, but rather that we **keep our possessions in proper perspective** and **don’t let our possessions possess us**. The prayer of the day from the beginning of today’s worship sums it up really well:

Teach us to love what is worth loving, to reject what is offensive to you, and to treasure what is precious in your sight....

No doubt, greed is offensive to God. Covetousness is offensive to God. Avarice is offensive to God. They’re all related, but not exactly the same. Greed is the selfish desire for more and more and more, without any shut-off valve to prevent us from accumulating so much stuff that we’re drowning

in it while others are left without. Covetousness is my selfish desire for what other people have that I don't, a desire so blinding I'm willing to sin either to steal it for myself or to ruin it for them. "Avarice is a hoarding of things we have but don't need."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes hoarding is a result of mental illness. And sometimes it's a result of spiritual illness.

Greed, covetousness, avarice are all violations of the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." As our confirmands learn, as you may already know (or as we'll learn in our Small Catechism class this coming fall ☺), Luther's explanation of that umbrella commandment, under which all the others fall, is both simple and profound:

We are to fear, love and trust God above all things.

When our greatest source of security is earthly possessions, whether a Papa Bear-sized silo or what we consider to be an adequate balance in our bank account, something's out of whack. When we invest the lion's share of our energy in anything other than our relationships with God, family, and neighbor, whether friend or stranger, something is amiss. Whether we're Scrooge, bent over his counting house desk, squinting at numbers from dawn to dusk, begrudging Bob Cratchett another piece of wood for the fire or time off for Christmas Day, or we're the Rich Farmer wallowing in his wealth, oblivious to anyone else's need, or Smaug the dragon in *The Hobbit*, laying so long on his treasure that it's encrusted in his skin, **physical abundance** doesn't translate into the **abundant life** that our Lord came to bring.

"Mine! All mine!" is not an acceptable mantra for a person of faith. From God's point of view, I'm pretty sure we are all rich: we live indoors, we have clean water at the turn of a spigot, we have more than enough food to eat, we have clothes to wear, we can read, we have a family of faith and we have faith. We trust that the Father in Heaven whom we ask for daily bread (in all its

forms) is going to provide it **to** us, and even is going to provide it **through** us, **to** others, if we just recognize that many gifts are given **to** us in order to pass **through** us to others.

As people of faith, we recognize we have nothing that we didn't first receive, including the gift of life. St. Paul writes, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). That is most evident when we live lives of generosity and love, like our Lord, not hoarding our blessings, but sharing them, not begrudging others their blessings, but helping preserve them (see Luther's explanation to the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment, "You shall not steal"), not filling our barns with Self but with God, often through service to our neighbor.

St. Paul **doesn't** say that money is the root of all evil, but he **does** say that **love** of money is the root of all evil. This is why people of faith realize, "Riches are not evil but they **are** dangerous."<sup>2</sup> May the Holy Spirit help us discern "How much is enough?" and prevent us from hoarding blessings intended for others. May we never avert our eyes from our neighbor's need or fail to extend a helping hand. May our earthly possessions turn our eyes **toward** rather than **away from** God, and may we remember: "Things possess us unless we are possessed by God."<sup>3</sup> Some say, "You can't take it with you," but the really wise ones say, "The only things we'll end up with are those we've given away." Amen

<sup>1</sup> Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, *The Workbook on the 7 Deadly Sins* (Nashville, Upper Room, 1997), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup>*Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (NY: Abingdon, 1951), p. 231.

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