

Faith Mennonite Church
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Building Bigger Barns: The trouble with greed
Luke 12:13-21

I'd like to begin by reading further in Luke chapter 12:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, *do not worry* about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, *why do you worry* about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and *do not keep worrying*. Instead, strive for God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Heavenly Parent's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

These are beautiful words, comforting words: "God will care for us, just as God cares for the lowliest of birds." But they're also challenging words: "Do not worry ... do not strive for what you will eat and drink ... sell your possessions and give alms." Whether we live from paycheck to paycheck or have a solid 401K retirement account, I doubt that there are many, if any, among us who don't fall prey, at least on occasion, to worry. We live in a society saturated by things, and so many measures of success, of self-worth and identity, are related to the amount of things we have or the size and location of our homes. Yet, the One we follow, the One we name as our Savior and Master, the One we claim as the incarnation of God, was homeless and likely owned very few possessions beyond clothes and sandals.

The fact that Jesus says "Do not worry...do not be afraid" four times in this brief passage tells us that we are not the first to worry. And the fact that the parable comes as a response to an inheritance matter, and is followed by the admonition to not worry about food and clothing, suggests that Jesus' audience was much like us, a mix of folks who were comfortable economically and those who lived in a precarious state, without secure income. The message to all is the same: don't be greedy, building bigger barns, and don't worry.

So let's look at the parable, which is unique to the Gospel of Luke. Luke has a special concern for economic and social matters. Luke places this parable as a response to a petition that someone made of Jesus: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." It was evidently common for people to seek the counsel or mediation of rabbis when there were disputes over inheritance matters, but clearly Jesus doesn't want to take up that role. We aren't given any window into the situation: Was the brother in question the eldest and sole inheritor, and the younger brother didn't see that as fair? Or were these co-inheritors and did this man want his brother to buy him out so he could move and get away? In an agricultural and land-based economy, inheritance was no small matter. But Jesus may have noted a selfish nuance here. The man did not ask Jesus to help his family work out their problem, or to consider how they might use their inheritance for the good of the community. Rather he asked for a specific outcome: "Direct my brother to give *me my money*." There seems to be a hint of entitlement and greed.

One of the questions for reflection this morning was whether any of you or your friends have been involved in a conflict related to inheritance? (Examples). A friend of mine who worked as a

consultant to families regarding the care of their aging members once told me that the wealthiest families with the most resources to care for their elder parent were usually the most conflicted families. Children became more concerned about how the care decisions would affect their inheritance than the well-being of their parent—whether or not they needed the inheritance.

The second reflection question was: What is the modern equivalent to building larger barns to store one's goods? (Examples) What is the difference between prudent *saving* for retirement (when many of us can expect to live into our 90s—perhaps 20-30 years beyond our income-generating years) and *greed*? (Responses) The man in the parable appears to be entirely self-centered: Following a bumper harvest, he asks: What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? Then he said, '*I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul, '*Soul*, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.

What is missing from this picture? The man neither acknowledges God's provision or the needs of the community around him. He's fully centered on his satisfaction and pleasure. He seems to have forgotten a central text for the Jewish people, the memory of coming into the Promised Land:

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest ... and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; God heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt ... with signs and wonders; and brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

There are two key items in this passage: 1) all that the Israelites have received is a gift of God and 2) before they partake of any of it, a portion is offered back to God and enjoyed by the community—the priests who serve them and the alien (the widow and orphans) in their midst. The man who built the bigger barns ignored both of these.

So as we take this parable to heart, what are we currently doing and what more might we do to avoid storing up treasures for ourselves, and instead practice being "rich toward God"?

- For all: "First fruits" giving; some portion of our incomes—an increased percentage as our income grows
- For some: working less than full time in order to volunteer time in the community
- Example of Ecuador MC: small group but big response to refugees + monthly peace workshops for children in neighborhood
- Can we have conversations about our savings & investments? How much is enough?
- Can we have conversations about inheritance plans: who will benefit from the resources we have at death?
- Other

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Hymn: 383: God, whose giving