

August 5, 2018

Luke 12: 13-21

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“The Problem with More”

Jesus wants us to work through some things on our own. There are times when he says, “I’m leaving that one to you.” I’m recalling the old fashioned hymn that begins with the words, “What a friend we have in Jesus, take it to the Lord in prayer...” It was Jesus who said, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Luke 11:10) Jesus sets us up to bring to him all the cares and woes of our lives. As a result, we trust there’s nothing we can’t take to the Lord but it seems there are certain situations when Jesus intends for us to figure it out by ourselves. Consider what we’ve heard at the beginning of today’s gospel reading. It’s a usual scene where the crowds are pressing in and around Jesus to receive what he’s offering. His teaching that day was about what it means to stay committed to God in the face of persecution. In the middle of the lesson, a man asks Jesus to solve a family dispute over money. “Teacher,” he says, “tell my brother to give me the part of the family inheritance that belongs to me.” (Luke 12:13) That was probably the wrong time to sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus, take it to the Lord...”

My own family is in a time of transition related to possessions. Just to share a bit of the context, my dad is battling advanced stage Parkinson’s disease and he’s recently moved into a care facility. As a result, my mom is downsizing, moving later this week into a place that is smaller and more conducive to where she is now in life. The new place doesn’t have room for all their stuff. We kids are making decisions on who gets what. We’re not a contentious family but there may need to be some negotiation behind the scenes. One of us has been thinking, “I want that.” But another has been thinking, “Yeah, but I sort of had my eye on that.” We’re not at the place where we have to take it to Lord but many of you know these matters can be delicate. In fact, lots of families know the tension that comes with dividing up the estate and its possessions. The family of the man who came to Jesus must have been in a mess so he says, “Teacher, you decide for us.” To which Jesus responds, “Who made me the judge?” Which in essence is to say, “Friend, that’s not my business. You’ve got to figure that out on your own.” Quite frankly, this isn’t the way he usually responds. We’re used to Jesus saying “Come to me.” We expect the Good Shepherd to carry us on his shoulders. Jesus doesn’t turn us away. He’s the one who opens his arms so we can share our burdens. What’s up with Jesus shutting the guy down when all he’s done is turn to him for guidance in the midst of a sticky family situation?

As always, we’re invited to look at the situation more deeply. Instead of thinking Jesus just shuts the guy down, look where our Lord takes both him and us next. He tells a parable about a farmer who builds bigger barns to hold all of his accumulated possessions. The story points to the futility of choices that assume what we store for ourselves is the best way to secure our future. It’s clear Jesus does not want to be drawn into the specifics of the family inheritance debate but it is also clear he gives exactly what is needed for this decision and every other judgment we make about wealth and possessions. Whatever we decide our judgments must connect to what Jesus calls being “rich toward God.” Now, having more of what the world provides matters to most of us. Jesus knows that and so he helps us see that what really matters most is having more of what God provides. In my family in your family, in the middle of the priorities we set everyday about what is valuable, in the decisions we make about what we give ourselves to, Jesus centers us in God. Building a life that depends upon bigger barns is ultimately a losing proposition.

Someone said that Saint Augustine, that spiritual giant in history, taught, “God has given us people to love and things to use. The problem is we confuse the two.” I haven’t verified Augustine actually said it but it sounds enough like him to be true. We’re to love people and use things, and the trouble comes when we get it turned around. The man who built the bigger barns put his security there. He loved what he had and loved the life made possible because of what he had. For him, being assured he could accumulate more and protect more was the priority. The problem with more it that is can mean less of God. This lesson isn’t hard for us to understand except that it pushes against the assumptions of our world and our culture. We can give the man the benefit of the doubt. I think he acknowledged Jesus’ authority. The man was drawn to him because he believed Jesus could solve the issue. The problem was, his priorities and concern for more didn’t allow him to see the life Jesus was offering

In the parable, Jesus calls the rich man a fool and this is where we experience the challenge of what Jesus teaches. Is the man really a fool? How so? The fact is, some would say he’s wise. He was good at farming and had a successful operation. The harvest was more than expected and the man did what any smart business man would do. He built bigger barns so he wouldn’t lose what he produced. He planned for the future. He had a great life and with more that life was going to continue for many years. He was wise in the way that guaranteed his wealth and success would be solid for years to come. What we discover as persons of faith is how the wisdom of the gospel calls into

questions the wisdom of the world. The man was foolish, says Jesus, because he did not consider the place God had his life.

I've been reviewing what wise Christians have said about wealth and I came across, again, what Billy Graham, said about the issue. Graham was the prolific evangelist of the 20th and early 21st century. As is true with every public figure, some have debated the theological specifics of what Graham taught but hardly anyone can deny his integrity. Billy Graham practiced what he preached and he said this, "There is nothing wrong with [people] possessing riches. The wrong comes," he taught, "when the riches possess them." When Jesus says we should be rich toward God he is saying that true life isn't about how much we holding on to. Life is about what has hold of us and this where the gospel is crystal clear. God has hold of us. Bigger barns can't change that but they can cloud our vision and prevent us from seeing the truth. At the center of true life is God's hold on us. Trusting this more and more is the ultimate security, not only for the farmer in the parable but for us, too.

In small ways today and throughout this week we will make decisions about what is most valuable. Some of us may even be in the midst of decisions that clarify what, for us, is the ultimate security in life. These experiences are the right time to take it to the Lord in prayer. And know this, Christ has already given us all we need to make faithful judgments in our lives. God's love is eternal. God's grace is forever. These never run out and they are never diminished. Take it to the Lord and, though he didn't say it exactly this way, Jesus would say to us, "You can take that to the bank." May the rich blessing of a life with God be overflowing in you.

Amen.