

The Stuff of Our Souls

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Psalm 107:1-9, 43

Luke 12:13-21

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Have you ever spoken to a group, taught a class, been in a one-on-one conversation about an important topic and you suddenly realize there's a person who isn't paying attention? This is what happens to Jesus in this passage. Jesus is teaching about important traits of God and what it means to be a person of faith. He has just taught the people around him how to pray, giving us the Lord's Prayer we still pray today. He has taught about generosity and trust. He has warned people about the various ways they might stray from God and how to avoid them. He is teaching about wisdom and relying on the inspiration from the Holy Spirit. When he is interrupted by a man making a very secular request. "Tell my brother," he says, "Tell my brother to split the family inheritance with me."

Now all fairness aside--I mean shouldn't brothers and sisters split their inheritance under most circumstances?--this must be a jarring question for Jesus, and a rude one. It is clear evidence that this man is not paying any attention to what Jesus is talking about and is caught up in his own thoughts and his own worries and his own schemes. It's as if I was standing up here preaching a sermon on the pitfalls of material greed and you interrupted me to ask, "Should I buy a hybrid or an electric car?"

The man's question shows a complete lack of understanding of Jesus' role in the community and the meaning and power of his ministry. Jesus is not a judge like the ancient leaders of Israel were. He is not the dispenser of justice for this community. He is a teacher, a preacher, a healer. Even worse, the man's question shows that he was paying no attention whatsoever to the teaching, preaching, and healing, but rather was spending his time ruminating on his own personal finances. During the sermon! His question interrupts Jesus and he reacts with what feels like it could be a testy reply. "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

But Jesus, never one to waste a teaching moment, recognizes that the man was caught up in worldly problems of storing up money, and he tells a parable about a rich man with the seemingly happy problem of his harvest being too abundant. Imagine that. This fellow has reaped so much grain that his barns can't hold it. Whatever should he do?

Let's listen: '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...'

The man is entirely oriented toward himself. He has no thought for family, for community, for God. He is all about me, me, me. Just like the man who interrupted Jesus with the inheritance

question. He is so distracted by material wealth and the accumulation of it that he has lost sight of what is important.

Notice that having money, earning money, saving money are not the problem here. Money is not inherently evil. Money is a tool that helps us navigate the world. It's even a tool that helps us be people of God. It's our attitude about money and material possessions that can get us into trouble. When we shift our focus to how much we have and when we worry about having the best of everything, we lose sight of the important things in life, our relationships with God, with the community, with our families, the things money can't provide. As those prophets of old sing to us, "I don't care too much for money. Money can't buy me love."

It also can't buy happiness. Research has shown that up to a certain point, happiness is related to income. It varies regionally because of cost of living, but the number tossed around in the US is \$75,000. Now the number for the bay area is higher than this because the cost of real estate is so high here, but for the sake of conversation, let's use it. On average in the US, \$75,000 will ensure that a family can have its basic needs -- a home, food, clothing, transportation -- and a little bit more for extras. Now obviously if you have more income than that, you can have more, higher quality stuff, a larger home in a more exclusive area, but it doesn't make you any happier.

It's even possible that you get less happy if you have more if your focus shifts from what actually brings joy in our lives.

Now I have enough income to be happy. In fact, I have the opposite problem. The accumulation of material goods in my life is stressing me out! I have too much stuff, and it's distracting and distressing. It makes my life less peaceful.

I don't want to build a bigger barn or rent a storage space, so I set out to improve this by making a spiritual practice of reducing my burden of stuff. I have long had a policy of one in/two out. If a tangible thing comes into my house, two of that kind of thing have to leave via donation, recycling, or when necessary trash. Now I'm reasonable -- this only applies to non-consumables and things we actually have too much of. I have had this rule since we moved from a 2000 square foot house with a large garage and attic and walk-in pantry and shed and tons of closet space into a 1200 square foot condo with a one car garage and less ample storage. But the spiritual practice of reducing stuff began in Lent. As I'm sure I have said before, I rarely give up something for Lent but rather prefer to take on a discipline that may continue on past Easter and become a good habit for life.

I had mixed success with this year's discipline. I decided to join other stuff-accumulators around the world by getting rid of 40 bags in 40 days. Each day in Lent, I planned to give away just one bag of things I don't need, releasing the things that have become a burden, a distraction to someone who actually needs them.

Now did I accomplish this? Not as fully as I had hoped. It turns out that Lent is a busy time in my line of work, and it was not every day that I was able to fulfill this commitment. And no it hasn't yet become a lifetime habit, but doing what I do manage to do has made my home a more peaceful place and I do like the feeling of releasing material goods and my dependence on them. It gives me more time and space to focus on what is important, my family, my congregation, my community.

So this poor man in the parable, you know the rich man who plans to solve his abundance problem by tearing down his barn and building a bigger one, Jesus is pointing out to us the folly of his ways. Sure he has all grain he needs to eat, drink, and be merry for the rest of his days, but at what cost?

I would assume that his barn was big enough to store everything he needs. After all he is a rich man, so he has accumulated grain and other goods in past harvests. What if instead of tearing it down so he could hide away more, he stored what he could and used the rest for a big feast for his neighbors? What if he gave grain to people who don't have enough? What if he sold the extra and used the money for the poor or to build a community resource?

Our abundance is a gift from God meant not for us to hide away in ever bigger barns. Our abundance is meant to be shared so that we build up abundance in love.