

Proper 13, C, 2025

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Jesus told a story about the land of a rich man producing abundantly. He laid up what he thought was ample, and then built larger barns to ensure his abundance would see him through. This would permit him to relax and eat and drink and be merry! The story Jesus tells does not applaud the man for his achievements. Instead, he is called a 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.”*

The story that comes to mind for me is from the Book of Acts, Ananias and Sapphira. My seminary professor Dr. Neiting always thought this to be among the best of stewardship texts but cautioned that the congregation may want to run you out for preaching from the Bible! But they also may give new consideration to the idea of tithing, giving ten percent for the work and mission of the Church.

It's from Acts chapter 5. Peter was in charge. Church members owned everything in common. They didn't think about private ownership, and so the Biblical text underscores that there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold to the Apostles' and Peter was in charge. Their resources were distributed to each as any had need. A Levite named Joseph sold a field and brought the money to the Apostles' and they gave him the name Barnabus which means *“son of encouragement.”* (He eventually works with Paul.)

But there was a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who also sold a piece of property and the two of them decided to keep back some of the proceeds. They brought a portion of the money and placed it at the Apostles' feet. *“Ananias,”* Peter asked, *“why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?”* How is it that you have contrived in your heart this deed to withhold from God? *“Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.”* About three hours later Sapphira came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, *“Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.”* Peter asked her *“how it is that you and her husband agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. The same men carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church!”*

The believers in the early church shared their possessions. This is a rather un-American sounding part of the Bible, and so because it sounds un-American, we often gloss over it. However it is in there along with loving your neighbor and your enemy and welcoming the foreigner, and a whole host of things that don't seem to line up with current American culture. Jesus supersedes all things, even our human made boundaries and borders. This morning the reading from Luke should make us sit up and take note. Maybe even think more critically about being rich toward God! Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

“Teacher,” a person interrupted. *“Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”*

The person who interrupted Jesus didn't get what he asked for. He didn't get arbitration. Instead, he heard a story. The story confronted the person with the folly of preoccupation with accumulated wealth, with the self-centeredness of "*my crops, my barns, my goods*" and the lack of concern for the community and lack of concern for God. The rich man in the story is rich in every way except rich toward God. This is a story about a rich man being sent empty away. This is a theme that we hear throughout the gospel of Luke. We heard it first from Jesus' mother, Mary, as she sang about the child in her womb; the child that would change everything, the child that in adulthood speaks words to calm anxiety and fear, the child that desires lasting peace, comfort, safety, welcome and rest.

Mary sings out "*God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty*" (Luke 1:53). When the biblical narrative presents rich men and wealthy people, I quickly transfer my thoughts to the likes of Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk. To the 1 %. This is at least one time when I want to step out of the limelight and take a seat with those who are hungry, those filled with good things. Who among us wants to be sent away empty? So, I quickly step aside knowing that my crops and barns and goods pale in comparison to the others who are far wealthier. We exist in a culture that equates self-worth, value, acceptance, and even friendship on the possessions we obtain, our address, occupation, clothing labels and vehicle. And yet this morning we are told a story containing important insight about being rich toward God.

Last week we heard about God's desire for us to be in prayer; ask, search, knock. This morning, we hear about God's desire for us to be in a relationship marked by the generous sharing of one's wealth with others in need. Stewardship appeals have historically been a way to move Christian people from selfish accumulation to generous giving. Our stewardship appeals have never quite met the mark, when placed alongside the Biblical witness, and Jesus' parables. The desire of the Stewardship committee is to keep us from hoarding and from building bigger barns, moving us to generosity and building bigger hearts.

If one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, then, of what does it consist? Last week we learned the priority of generous prayer and today of generous giving. Our lives consist of generosity toward God through prayer and generosity toward those in need through giving. This is the richness that Jesus communicates when he told a story about a man building bigger barns. It was what the early church was communicating when it told of Ananias and Sapphira.

Each Sunday we hear the story of how God gives generously to us; grace, undeserved love freely given; in confession's word of absolution and communion's tangible word of bread and wine, we hear that our sins are forgiven and that we are made whole. We hear the story of God's redeeming love in Christ Jesus, his suffering and death on the cross and the joy we anticipate celebrating in Easter's resurrection. The story keeps us wrapped in God's generosity. This morning, we are invited into a story. The story is precipitated by an interruption by someone who has a personal desire to have Jesus do something for him. Jesus tells a story that changes things and changes lives. His story implicitly asks the man to do something for others and by so doing is rich toward God.

Opportunities for us to tell stories abound. Jesus tells stories drawing us closer to God. Today we hear that life is not driven by desperate moves to acquire and accumulate, building bigger barns, but life is driven through generous sharing with others in need. Amen.