

## “Rich Toward God”

Luke 12:13-21 (August 4, 2022)

Our Gospel reading today is one of those uncomfortable passages where Jesus talks about money. There are quite a few of these in the Bible. More in the Gospel of Luke than anywhere else.



The fact is, Jesus talked a *lot* about money. It's second in frequency only to the kingdom of God! Which indicates just how important this subject was to him, and perhaps also how closely it was linked to his kingdom teaching.

So why is it we don't hear more sermons about this? Well it's not easy talking about money, is it? It's such a complex thing. It gets tied up with our opinions, our politics and, more than anything, our own self-interests.



In our reading, Jesus was asked to arbitrate a dispute.

Here he was, teaching about life and death issues, and someone came to him whining about his brother, and how he's not giving him his fair share of the estate. What the man really wants is to recruit Jesus to *his* side and help him win the argument. “No thanks,” Jesus said.

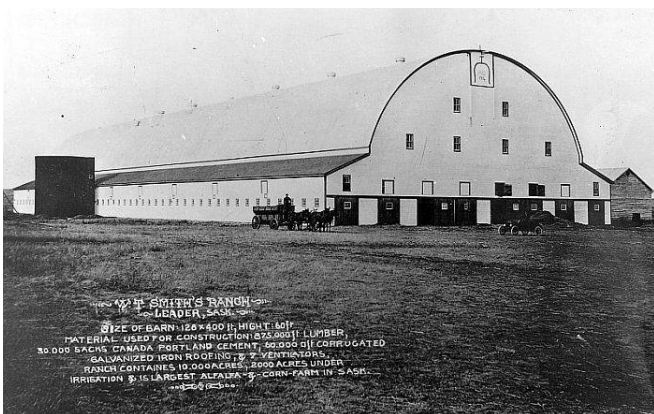


But notice that Jesus *did* use this opportunity to teach his disciples. “Be on guard against all kinds of *greed*,” he said. And also this: “A person's life does *not* depend on the abundance of one's possessions.”



Then he told a parable. As usual, these parables make us think carefully – perhaps on a deeper level than we've ever thought before – about what we're meant to do with our stuff, and our attitude toward these things.

“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.” This man was very fortunate. We might even say that he was blessed. But he also had a problem: “What am I going to do with all this stuff? My barns aren't big enough to store it.” So he decided to build a bigger barn.



This is a picture of a barn built in 1914 by W.T. Smith, near Leader, SK. It took a hundred men to build it, 875,000 ft lumber, 30,000 sacks of Canada Portland Cement and 60,000 ft of corrugated galvanized iron roofing. Rumour was – if a cowboy ever went into that barn it would take him three days to round up his cattle!

“I'll build a bigger barn,” says the man in our parable. “I'll sock away all this stuff and it will last for years. I'll be able to take it easy. Put my feet up, relax. Eat, drink and be merry.” He envisions a “good life,” a life of ease and enjoyment.



And here's what I find myself saying: "What's *wrong* with that? Isn't this one of the goals of our life-journey? To be able to get to that point where you don't have to worry about things any more? You can go out for dinner. You can travel. You can do whatever you want, *when* you want.

"Freedom 55," is what one company used to call it. Store your crop in *our* barns, they said, and we'll look after it for you. And when the time is right you'll be able to live in perfect freedom.

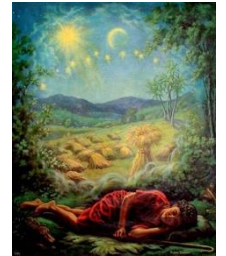
I need to pause here and say this sermon is not meant to be a criticism about financial planning. And there's nothing wrong, actually, with *enjoying* life and the good things of God's creation. Lindsay and I have just returned from a wonderful vacation. We thank God we're able to do that.



I asked myself this week what a farmer living in SK might do. When you're farming on the prairies you have to be prepared for fluctuations. One year can be difficult. Maybe a drought. Maybe the land doesn't yield so much. Maybe the market is down. All which means that when a good year comes, you *have* to put some aside.

Remember Joseph the dreamer? 7 years of plenty, 7 years of drought. The prudent thing to do is build some barns to store the extra grain. Then when those lean years come people can avoid starvation.

The folks who listened to Jesus' parable must have been familiar with that story. And I can imagine them thinking the farmer has it right. Go ahead, build some bigger barns! That's what I'd do.



This is *so typical* of parables. They draw us in. Get us all nodding our heads in agreement. And then they deliver some unexpected news that shocks us, disturbs us. And *maybe* cracks us open to a new reality – *kingdom* reality.



It's like an alarm going off that jolts us awake. So we sit straight up and say, "Woe, why couldn't I see that coming?" The "alarm" in this parable comes when God gives the farmer a disturbing message.

"You fool!" God says to him. Which is harsh language, isn't it? "You *fool!* Don't you know that this very night your life will be demanded from you."

We all die. And to pretend that we can go on living and never have to think about the *way* we live – that is indeed foolishness.

Remember that barn I told you about near Leader? It was built in 1914 and was reputed to be the biggest barn in Canada. However, W.T. Smith, died in the flu epidemic of 1918. He had the barn 4 years. After his death, it was dismantled to pay off the mortgage.



So what can we *learn* from Jesus' parable?

On one hand we keep thinking that more stuff will make us happy. And the world reinforces that message all the time. We keep on filling our barns. Replacing the old bins of stored up harvest with new improved crops that will bless our lives a thousand fold.

At the same time we know it's a bit of a sham. Because more stuff brings more headaches and more anxieties and more complications.

More stuff cannot fix the *relationships* that are part of our lives. More stuff cannot insulate us from forces at work in the world that bring instability and disruption: Violence, terrorism, disease. Your riches won't stop you from getting cancer. More stuff is not the panacea that we think.



I'm not telling you anything new here. I'm just saying there's this tension between what the *world* tells us and what *we know* to be true. And sometimes it takes a bit of a shock to bring us to that realization.

Security doesn't come from building bigger barns. It only comes as a *gift* – from the God of all eternity. A God who promises to love us always and forever, without fail. A God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, who suffers and dies for us, so that no sin will ever separate us from him. And not even death can keep us from the depths and riches of his love.

For a Christian, death is *not* the worst thing that can happen. You know that, don't you? If God is with us in this life, won't God also be with us in the life that is to come? Even *more* so?



At the end of the parable Jesus said, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for *himself* but is *not* rich toward *God*."

Accumulating things for *ourselves*. Isn't that what the farmer did? If you go back and read this passage carefully, you will see that the farmers' plans revolve consistently around himself: "My grain, my goods, my barns, my life, my plans, my enjoyment." It's all rather *self-serving*, isn't it?

So he had a bumper crop. Can he say "thank-you"? So he's got more than he knows what to do with. Can he share some with his neighbours? What this amounts to is the amassing of wealth for the benefit of *one*.

When Joseph built bigger barns, it was to provide food for the whole nation. To ensure that, in a time of famine, not a single person in Egypt would need to go hungry. That's *not* self-serving. That's something very different.



So maybe this passage isn't just about money. Maybe it has to do with our *attitude* towards that money, and how we are called to work for the blessing of *others*. And maybe most of all it has to do with how we value our *relationship with God*. Jesus says our lives need to be "rich toward God."

I've thought a lot about that this week. Are *you* rich toward God? What does that mean?



Eugene Peterson says we need to fill our barns with God and not with self. And I think that's a helpful way of understanding it. If only the farmer could let God into his plans and operations. But no, God doesn't even get honourable mention.

When our lives are rich toward God, God is at the centre of *everything*. We have an awareness of God in all we do. The plans we make, the words we speak, the actions we take, include God.

We have an abundance of God. Our barns our full of God! We seek to dwell in God's presence day and night. We're filled to overflowing with God's love. A love that is everlasting and never comes to an end. We live with gratitude, thankfulness, joy.

And we live with *generosity*. We seek to share God's wealth, not hoard it. Because being rich toward God means that we are called to be rich toward others as well. So what about you? Are you rich toward God?



What would that look like for the farmer? How might *his* life have unfolded differently?

Maybe the news of his impending death would not have been such a terrible shock. Maybe he'd say, "I'm ready to go. I've lived my whole life with God. I know that God will be there, even in death, to embrace me with his love."

Maybe he would say, "I'm glad God gave me that amazing harvest. Because here's what I *did* with it. Here's how I used it to *bless* the lives of *others*."

A seasoned pastor once remarked that he'd listened to a lot of death bed confessions, but never once had he encountered a person who regretted being generous, or loving, or compassionate!



So the farmer would still have died. That comes to all of us. But his departure would be peaceful. And those final days of his life might have been some of the best he'd ever lived!

Life consists of more than material possessions. We know that. The trick is *living* it. Which means putting God at the centre, not ourselves. Loving God, desiring God, living for God. And letting our lives rest in the love of God that comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ.



I want to finish by asking you to think about some of the ways you experience God's blessing in your life. What is *your* abundant harvest? Now pause and *thank* God for what you have received – whatever it is.

And now ask God to show you what to do with that blessing. How can you use it for the service and life of God's kingdom? Amen.