

A SERMON BY RICHARD D. CLEWELL
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TITLE: "SO MUCH, YET SO LITTLE"
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 12: 13-21, [COL. 3: 1-11]

I don't know about all of you, but I notice that I am quite a pack rat. Over the years I have accumulated a lot of "stuff" as if somehow I need to hold on to these seeming treasures. My wife and I often have said that we're in big trouble if we ever have to move. And yet, the day will come when we move either temporarily or ultimately.

I remember two garage sales vividly – when my aging mother sold her home and when my in-laws moved to a full-care facility – the seeming necessities and perceived treasures – like thirty-five years of National Geographics, bald car tires, baby and adult clothes from the forties and fifties, doll collections, stamp collections, old lamps and worn-out furniture. All pearls of apparent great value sold for a few bills and generally more coin.

Even sadder are some estate sales where the owner has died. Absent the owners, the items lose their meaning. Those present think, "My there's a lot of stuff here!" The auctioneer calls out Lot 22, a collection of four hundred antique perfume bottles. Eyes roll and knowing smiles appear, but no one bids. The auctioneer looks at the estate agent who in turn look's at the deceased's daughter: a lifetime's hobby and a person's identity have come to this.

In our Gospel text Jesus is confronted with a similar situation. (Read Luke 12: 13-21) A man in the crowd of followers approaches Jesus and tries to get him to arbitrate an inheritance dispute with his brother. Obviously this was very important to this man and, I suspect, involved a significant sum. Jesus refuses to enter the dispute. In fact he appears to have no interest in engaging this matter, but rather does choose this situation to teach a lesson about what is important in God's economy. As he often did, he relates a story, this time about a very successful farmer who produced ample crops, built large barns to hold all his grain thus insuring himself of a safe and secure future. He could retire – relaxed and enjoying the good life. But God comes to him and says, "You fool, this night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" In Jesus' culture, it would have been evident to those followers that this man ignored the tithe demanded by the Law. He had not left grain for the gleaners, the widow and orphans- essentially he was self-centered and greedy.

Now surely Jesus is talking about the rich – not us. But I think he is speaking to us. Much of our resources are tied up in tomorrow – pensions, stock portfolios, IRAs while our neighbors need help

today – individually, collectively, nationally and internationally. During the recent recession charitable giving bottomed out. Relief agencies with unemployment at new highs need all the help we can give. Yet we seem to proliferate plasma TVs, expensive cars, accessories and “toys” of all sorts – and for what?

The writer to the church at Colosse gives the alternative of God’s wisdom revealed in Jesus Christ. In Col. 3: 1,2 we read, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Is he asking us to be so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly good? Heavenly relatedness to the risen Christ is not to be understood as a form of absent-mindedness about ordinary life or social and economic conditions. Having a divine reference point is, instead, the very thing that should drive Christians on within their social situation to pursue justice and genuine compassion. The hope declared is that believers share in Christ’s resurrection life in transformed lives leading to a reconciled cosmos, including heaven and earth.

Their role in this drama is sustained by their relationship to their Lord in heaven and directed by the hidden spirit within them. The emphasis is learning how to live the Christian life individually and corporately because we have been reconciled to God and the divine way through Christ.

The problem and foolishness of the Gospel’s rich man is that he failed to see his life and possessions as being on loan from God; that they were blessings, not rights. Response to such grace and provision is thanks and offering the same to others and to the world. William Sloane Coffin puts it well when he states, “We don’t have to be “successful,” only valuable. We don’t have to make money, only a difference, and particularly in the lives society counts least and puts last.”

In this man’s circumstances the secrets of his heart are not hidden from God. Imagine this soliloquy – “What will I do?” he asks himself. Undoubtedly he was ready for the harvest, but its abundance exceeded his calculations and there was not enough room to store it all. The problem is not in the size of the harvest but in his insistence of gathering and storing it all for his own use. The thought of giving to persons to help them never crosses his mind. Instead he will tear down and build bigger barns to gather all his grain and goods. He is the epitome of the Sinatra song “I did it my way.” The man has shut out everyone else from his life and thoughts – just him and his possessions. And God speaks to confront this reverie of his future – “fool” evoking Psalm 14, “Fools say in their hearts, there is no God.” God’s announcement “this very night” sharply contradicts the man’s presumption of “many years” to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. This man adopted the view of the late comedian Eddie Cantor who declared, “If I can’t take it with me, I’m not going!”

The rich farmer in this parable had so much and yet so little. Jesus in this story draws a moral – it is the picture of a man who lays up treasure for himself but is miserly and even bankrupt in his relationship with the Lord and others. Here the story speaks to us as well, exposing our own inner commitments as clearly as it reveals the rich fool’s thoughts. It holds a mirror before us and asks us to take a good look at our own inner lives and to listen to our own inner voices. Again Coffin speaks to such reflection, “We must guard against being too individualistic and elitist in our understanding of spirituality. Some Christians talk endlessly about the importance of one’s interior life and how to develop it more fully, forgetting that Christ is born to bring hope and joy also to whole communities of people – the exiles, the deported, the tortured, the silenced.

There can be several dimensions to the moral reflections on this tale. The Scriptures are filled with accounts of possessions becoming God in people’s lives and how the perceived pursuit of self-sufficiency can produce a person who does not need anyone else – family, faithful friends, a community of support, or even the security of God’s love. Greed is the antithesis of generosity and the thought of what one might be able to do for those in need or burdened by injustice never enters this guy’s thinking. The greatest good this person can imagine is a life of maximizing his own pleasure. Leisure, recreation, and freedom from the demands of work – this rich man’s vision of the future sounds uncomfortably like one that most of us have about our retirement years. What gives our life meaning now? What will give it meaning then? Perhaps, above all the parable probes our basic commitment in life. Peter Rhea Jones declares this about the parable’s protagonist, “The rich fool may protest that he has always believed in God, but when it comes to managing his life, dealing with possessions and planning for the future, he lives a though there was no God.” Such practical atheism raises the question, “What difference should our faith in God make in the practical matters of life?”

Now granted, this is not one of Jesus’ more memorable or beloved teachings. Perhaps it does move from preaching to “meddling.” In this day of the rich getting richer and the poor, poorer, it nonetheless is extremely important. Our culture’s biggest problem is materialism. Many people are literally working themselves to death. They are working themselves out of marriages and out of families. When “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” is a favorite T.V. show, what does that tell you? Jesus doesn’t meet us here today to give us advice on shrewd investments or a program on how to make us healthy, wealthy and wise.

Rather Jesus engages us here in love to teach us and to show us God’s way of transformation and meaning. In our restored relationship with our Lord in Jesus Christ, we are blessed and gifted and are expected to be responsible in our utilization of those blessings.

Robert Wathnow in his book, *God and Mammon in America*, observes that “A great number of Christians in American culture have little idea of what the word “stewardship” means. The relationship between religious faith and economic practice is compartmentalization. Religious convictions and money matters belong to two distinct realms that rarely overlap. Prayer, scripture reading, religious values and convictions belong to the private world of religious devotion. Spirituality functions therapeutically, but appears to have little power to address our daily lives, and our life style choices.” Perhaps this explains why we tithe less and less, now less than 2% to our communities of faith to do ministry for our Lord. For a country who claims Christian values, particularly in election years, as the richest nation in the world we give one tenth of one percent to foreign aid – dead last among the wealthiest countries.

One tenth of one percent? Two percent? Or ten? Everything belongs to God – how much must go for accomplishing the Lord’s way? If we have not been generous and compassionate in our lifetimes, God will compel us to give those things away, even as we too must go. “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mark 8:36).

In another parable, in this chapter, the living Christ exhorts, “From everyone to whom much as been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” (Luke 12:48) “So much, yet so little?” Christ’s call to us is to listen, to risk the truth, and to change our lives with the help of God’s supportive Spirit. We are blessed that we in turn may bring blessings to others and to demonstrate God’s way in this world in which we are divine representatives. We have so much in Jesus Christ. How much do others see Christ’s love in our lives and actions? What is most important to us? May God help us to seek the kingdom as our first priority and the source of genuine value and transformation for us and for the world in which we live. Just perhaps our lives might mean more with much less. To the God of all grace, who calls us to share God’s blessings through Christ with others, be the transformation of all creation.

Amen

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