

How Rich Are You? (Lk. 12:13-21)

Rev. Karla Bowman, 8/07

Beginning my in-depth study of this Scripture, I decided to do a little independent and informal research. So I polled the capable, committed and captive church staff during a staff meeting with this question, “What makes you feel rich?” I should have known that their answers might not include: my Rolls Royce, my second home on the French Riviera, my mink coat (sorry, one of us actually does own a mink!), well, you get the idea...The most common answer was the feeling of being useful, making a difference in a unique way and relationships...friends, family, the reality of being loved. These are the things that make them feel rich. While their answers may be predictable they also reflect their relationship with Jesus. I am humbled to work on the ministry team with these people.

Let's return again to the Scripture to see what more we can learn about being rich. When I study Scripture I look for the unexpected thing. I try to read the story as if I've never heard this it before. So my first response was why is Jesus so cranky with this guy? Who is this person who wanted Jesus to settle an argument over an inheritance? Scripture say's there is a “crowd gathered” and if we read back a few verses we see that the crowd is rowdy, angry and is a mix of religious authorities looking to trap Jesus, and Jesus' own disciples, as well as some assorted bystanders. This crowd is dangerous, more foe than friend. So is this a real request for help or just another setup?

Jesus knows. Jesus is able to see into the human heart and chooses to use the situation to give a teaching about greed. Greed being defined by me as the obsessive desire for more than enough. So he tells a story. One of the most significant points of this story is that the land produces so abundantly that existing storage facilities couldn't hold it all. The barn was too small. It was more than a bumper crop it was a miraculous harvest, a divine blessing. So the real challenge is not just how to protect this hoard of wealth but how should the farmer respond to this hugely gracious blessing from God?

The rich farmer's first mistake is to not consult anyone outside himself. He doesn't talk with colleagues or friends or even God, just “self”. And not surprisingly, “self” gives back a selfish answer. “Self, you've done well. Self, you've got it made. Retire, Take it easy. Self, eat, drink, and be merry.” There is no talk of God's portion, the tithe. No talk of bonuses for the workers. No talk of serving anyone else's needs. Just self's. The barn is filled with self.

And then the scene shifts radically. God, who has been watching and listening in the wings, steps forward, “Waank! Wrong answer. Time's up; game's over. Tonight you die. He who dies with the most stuff, still dies and doesn't get to take the stuff with him.” Friends, God has a plan. Our plans will change.

What can we learn from this punchy little parable? We can learn the difference between possessions and treasures. The things that make us feel rich are our treasures. What's the difference? Consider:

You possess a job....You treasure your family. You possess a house..... You treasure a home. You possess a bank account....You treasure your friends. You possess a car....You treasure your freedom. You possess a treadmill....You treasure your health. You possess an appointment book....You treasure your time. You possess a heart.... You treasure love.

Possessions can be powerful tools. Or they can be false gods, idols that can rule our lives. They can be things that own their owners. This is not to say that Jesus calls all of us to be economically poor or totally without possessions. Christianity is not a “one size fits all” spirituality. Among the tremendous diversities and freedoms we enjoy in our faith, there is even diversity about how many “possessions” each of us can handle.

That is why Jesus, in another story (the parable of the talents told in the gospel of Matthew) teaches us that inequality does not spell injustice. We all share as equals but we are not all given equal shares. It is not inherently wrong for one person to possess more than another person because each person has different needs, some more costly than others. Those needs can be physical and spiritual. The soul can be an expensive thing to grow. It can be fed sometimes by a simple walk in the woods all the way to a night at the opera. Although these requirements are unique to each of us, God made all of these things “daily bread” that feed the soul as well as the body. We remember these lines of an old song: “Hearts starve as well as bodies; Give us bread, but give us roses.”

I can connect with that sentiment. Roses feed my soul. According to Navajo spiritual tradition, we walk the “beauty way” when we walk with God.

So when we are enjoying the requirements of our own souls, we can measure them as treasures, not possessions...they are gifts to our spirits that expand our appreciation of the abundant goodness of God. Not just possessions to boast our self-accomplishments.

For example, during the recent fires that threatened our community, people were packing up their cars with their treasures. Things that are irreplaceable.

I talked with some who told me what they packed: family pictures, pets, medications, maybe a few special mementoes. No one mentioned the big screen TV, computers, or the special china. Sometimes the gift of a traumatic crisis is that we see clearly what really does matters to us most.

Money itself is not the treasure. Yes, enough money is a blessing. But what is enough? When I was young and poor, a dollar in my pocket was an abundance of riches. Now I feel slightly nervous carrying less than fifty flanked with a credit card. How much does it take to make you feel secure? What’s in your wallet? What’s in your barn? And if you’re feeling secure, how rich are you?

God makes the greatest treasure in all of life available to each of us; this most precious of treasures is our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. When sin separates us from God and each other, the cross is the healing bridge that connects us once again. This treasure is His alone to give; He gives this treasure through our believing that the too-good-to-be-true offer of salvation is genuine. Friends, believe Him. Open your heart and receive the riches of everlasting

love. You may not be able to take this treasure to the local bank, but you can take it with you right now. It's yours to keep forever.