

Sermon on Luke 12:13-21
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today I am going to talk about the “elephant in the room” – a matter that concerns all of us and consumes most of our waking hours pursuing. Not sex, not politics, but MONEY. Jesus spoke about money and possessions in the gospel today, and how they relate to our lives and our faith. I am going to talk about money because it is the most important thing in our lives...well, isn't it? Prove to me that it's not! Our attitude about money, and how we use it (save it, lend it, or spend it) says a lot about our priorities and about our faith in God.

The other day my sister and brother-in-law told us about their new neighbor, a man who bought a house across the street from them. This neighbor evidently had about \$100,000 left over to spend on his home after purchasing it. So he went about doing lavish landscaping, removing one gigantic tree for \$30,000 and replacing it with new trees. He removed one brand new front door and replaced it with another. He replaced new granite kitchen counter tops with a new color, and new carpeting was removed for new hardwood floors. The new house that he had purchased is now totally transformed, and much larger. We all thought that this was a big waste of money, even foolish – but it was his right to spend it. So what led him to spend so much money to rebuild the house he had just bought?

Most of us have tax accountants or tax preparers whom we go to every year just before April 15 to help us prepare our annual tax returns. Not only because filling out the forms is complicated – but also because we want to do it right, and a professional tax preparer will help us *save some money* (or so we hope!). Many of you also have a financial advisor, who gives you advice about where to put your investments, how much to save, how much you can give as charitable contributions, and still come out at the end of the year with enough to live on. Any financial advisor worth their salt will help you make good financial decisions that help you save and invest money so that your total “financial portfolio” will grow. We'd all love to have that problem of having too much money and wondering what to do with it! Building a bigger house and having financial security is the American dream for many people.

And then Jesus comes along, and squashes that dream as so much foolishness. Today Luke's gospel tells the story of a person in the crowd who wanted Jesus to settle a dispute for him: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” (Has anyone here ever had a problem with relatives fighting over inheritance money or heirlooms? Has anyone ever heard of people

getting divorced and fighting over money? It happens, right? It's a common thing.) So Jesus replied, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" Then he proceeded to tell a parable, that taught how God's values are not the same as ours, especially when it comes to money.

We've heard this story before. A rich man found that his land had produced another "bumper crop". What should he do with all this abundance? His barns were not large enough to hold it all. What to do? So, he thought, I'll tear down my old barns and build much bigger ones, so that I can store all my grain and goods. Then I can finally relax and tell myself that I can now eat, drink, and be merry. (His financial security had now been achieved.) Any financial advisor would say, "Well done!" And most of us would be very jealous of his success. He has just done what we would call a very good thing. He has not done anything wrong, and he has amassed his fortune honestly, without cheating anyone – through hard work and good choices. Why not store it up for a rainy day?

But Jesus says that God would consider this man a fool! Because he could die tonight, and then what would his riches bring him? Who would get the inheritance? His children, or other relatives, who hadn't earned them? *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

Hmmm. I don't know who among us would want Jesus to be our tax accountant or financial advisor! We're not used to being called fools for saving money. So what was it about what this rich farmer did that Jesus called foolish? I think what Jesus found so foolish was how the person thought only of himself. "What should *I* do with *my* crops and goods? I will build new barns for *myself* to store *my* goods, and *I* will eat, drink and be merry. All of his possessions were his alone, and were meant for his benefit, for his financial security. No mention at all of his family, wife or children, relatives or community – and certainly no thought of God entered in. His foolishness was that he had only stored up his treasures for *himself*. To God, selfishness is not only "sinful, it is also "foolish".

The other thing that this man did that was foolish was to place his trust in the future on his financial security, on having enough grain and goods stored up in his new and larger barns. It seems logical to us – if you want to be sure you have enough to eat for the future, save enough food to last for months, even years. (Hadn't Joseph even advised the Pharaoh to do just that in the Old Testament – store up grain over seven good years in order to eat during seven years of famine? But there is a difference between saving to *provide* for future scarcity (which is smart), versus hoarding to *secure* our future (which is impossible).

These days we are bombarded by messages telling us how much financial resources and MONEY are required to give us security for the future. We need hundreds of thousands of dollars for housing, many thousands for college education for our children and grandchildren, and perhaps even millions for health

care - the price tag for security is almost unimaginable, and certainly unattainable for most people. No wonder we're so insecure! But we, like the rich man in the parable, buy into it, and keep striving to secure our future, but we never have enough! And once we are no longer able to fully care for ourselves, our medical bills and fees for nursing care will eat up every cent much faster than we could ever earn it. So what are we working so hard for, and why do people try to amass fortunes, when they are so soon gone? It's easy to become cynical and discouraged, like the teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes who said, "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!...I see all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and chasing after wind.... What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?*"

Have you ever felt such discouragement as this ancient writer did, about our human prospects for all our toil? I think all of us do, sometimes. So often we ask, "what's it all for?" or "what does it all mean?" when we work so hard for that which we can never keep. It may be that one of our rational human responses is to become discouraged or cynical like this writer, when we consider such things. For what sense does it make to build larger dwellings for our possessions, when one day all of this will be gone.

This is where Jesus offers a much better way for us all, through faith in the one who made us. Jesus warns us all to "take care, and be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." To trust in our possessions is the height of foolishness. Jesus invites you and me to become rich toward God, instead of storing up treasures for ourselves – for this is where true wisdom begins. Christ often said, we do not live by bread alone. Do not work for the bread that perishes, but seek instead the bread of life. For "*whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

As we heard from the letter to the Colossians, "*Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*"

So what is a wiser thing to do with our abundance and our possessions? Rather than tearing down our old barns and building new larger ones to keep more and more for ourselves, how about finding ways to share with others, to provide for those in need, and to give back to God and the community a portion of what God has first given to us? This is what we call "stewardship", taking care of the earth and what God has entrusted to us, and giving a portion of the first fruits to God and the Church – out of gratitude for all we have been given. Not just because the Church "needs it", but because all of this is God's in the first place. All we have been given is from God, in order to take care of all of our needs. Any

abundance is a gift from God, which is best shared with the world so that everyone will have enough. This is God's intent, and when we are faithful, we live according to it.

For you and I, just like the rich farmer in the parable, are foolish if we think that all this abundance is ours, and meant to provide only for ourselves. We are fools if we think of ourselves alone, and that riches consist of the quantity of our possessions. But we are wise when we remember that all we have comes from God, that we are only rich when we are "rich toward God" – making God the center of our lives – and show our greatest wisdom with love for God and for our neighbor, sharing our abundance with God and with others. So we ask God for the gift of faith and increased wisdom, so that we will be wise in our attitude and use of money – to give glory to God and show love for our neighbors. In Jesus' name.