

Sermon on Luke 12:13-21 & Colossians 3:1-11
11th Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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Build Community or Bigger Barns?

Okay, picture the situation: You are home from work on a Saturday, and the kids are home from school, as well. After lunch, you send the kids off to the playroom, while you set yourself down on the sofa to finally read the morning newspaper, or to take a quick nap. You are worn out from transporting the kids to Saturday morning activities: swimming lessons or soccer practice, making sure everyone ate something for breakfast and lunch. Now you have some time for yourself. For about five minutes. Then you hear some agitated little voices, then some whining, which becomes a shout and a scream: “I’m gonna tell MOM!” (or Dad, depending on your gender identity). You wait for it. In a moment, the offended child enters the room. “Mom! Dad! Joey’s not sharing! Make him share with me!” Evidently, Joey had gotten into the playroom first, and took out the toys that his sister liked best. When she told him to hand them over, Joey refused. This led to that, and soon they are making it YOUR problem. Seeking the wisdom of Solomon (or his many wives), you come up with an answer that temporarily sends her out, back to the playroom, and you wait for the next outburst. How many of you are familiar with such a situation? Or are all of your children or grandchildren “little angels”, only seeking that which is from above? Who share naturally, because they inherited the “sharing gene” from you?

Well, that’s how the gospel begins today, with a family spat over possessions. Jesus was teaching his disciples, which attracted a crowd of thousands, who heard him teach that we should not worry so much, that the God who created us will surely take care of us all. Everyone in the crowd listened attentively, until someone in the crowd called out to Jesus with a very typical family problem: “*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.*” Oops. I’ll bet you could hear a pin drop. Who was this greedy brother who refused to share, and where was he? What was the problem, anyway? And how would Jesus answer this one?

But Jesus said to him, “*Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you? Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*” (Warning! This text has given rise to all kinds of stewardship sermons, and advice to live simply.) So Jesus’ answer to the person’s dilemma about sharing an inheritance was to tell a parable – a story – about a rich man whose farm brought a very good harvest. The man’s dilemma was this: his

barn was overflowing with an abundant harvest. What should he do? He had no more room. So he decided to tear his old barn down and build a bigger one, to store his grain and goods for years to come, so that he could “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” The thought of sharing his abundance with others, or giving to charity, never seems to have crossed his mind. What did Jesus say to this? *“You 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 the treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”* Everyone was shocked that Jesus would call a successful rich man (who “had it made”) a “fool!”

Such a parable has great relevance to our dilemma over possessions in America today, and leaves most of us feeling guilty – or feeling superior to those of our neighbors (or those dirty rich 1%) who have way too much and build bigger barns while their neighbors may languish in poverty. Is that where we should go with our interpretation of Jesus’ parable? Is this for guilt and transformation?

Let me give you an example from my experience. Some of you may know that my siblings and our families share in ownership of a small bit of property on a lake in Anoka county. In 1933 my grandfather and great-grandfather, Clyde Clarence and James Henry Colwell built a fishing shack on the south side of the lake, which they later expanded into a two bedroom cabin with a front porch. Very well built, and we still use it today. It even has an outhouse and ancient wiring for electricity, which is not up to code (shhh) – so one day we will have to tear it down and rebuild something more suitable and safe. But we haven’t yet, and it’s 2016. It’s kind of hard to do that when one property has several owners.

But this year we have a different dilemma. Next door to our lot, a single mother with two teen-aged boys purchased the lot from our neighbors over the winter, tore down their very nice lake home, and rebuilt a much larger executive home. Or should I say castle? Or McMansion? This spring, just before Memorial Day, I drove up to the lake to rake leaves and mow the grass, and what did I see? A gigantic new home, almost finished, with a three car garage. All the trees had been removed, and many truckloads of dirt and great landscaping stones had been brought in to relandscape the property. There was also a new dock with a new, expensive speedboat and a fleet of jet skis. Then we heard the scuttlebutt from our other neighbors, who had heard that the new owner was a realtor who had made a fortune from selling real estate, and was building a big, new party house for entertaining friends and clients. In comparison, our little family retreat lies exposed as this tiny little shack that now looks even smaller. Should we be jealous of our neighbors’ new “digs”? Do we try to “keep up” with the Joneses by rebuilding ourselves? Highly unlikely! Will we find our family cabin condemned? Or is there ultimate condemnation for our new neighbors’ lifestyle and tastes for material excess? Actually, this is a “non-problem” – because even

our tiny little cabin is a Minnesota example of the affluence of American culture, where many of us have a second property that we don't live in or need, on a lake, when so many are living in poverty without adequate housing. If we were to complain, we might find Jesus giving us the same answer he gave to those complaining about sharing their inheritance. For an inheritance is free –not earned - it is received as a gift, so why are human beings always fighting over free gifts and our excess? What should our priorities be? Is it better to save our excess for the future when we may need it, or to share it with others in community? So the question becomes a title I propose for this sermon: *With the gifts of God, should we build community or build bigger barns?*

Such questions even enter into our political debates, as they did earlier in the year with Bernie Sander's campaign about the expanding wealth of the 1 percent and the shrinking resources of the other 99. It's probably too easy to pick on billionaire candidate Donald Trump as an example of excessive wealth, when the Clintons have also become wealthy – and most national politicians have to have financial means just to successfully run in American politics today. But truth be told, I don't think this parable is actually about the "sin of excessive wealth" or even the bad choices or priorities of the rich. It's actually about the choices that each one of us make, about who we will serve (as Jesus said in chapter 16, about "God and mammon" – "*you cannot serve both God and wealth*").

It is clear in the gospel of Luke that Jesus teaches us to serve God, and not focus our lives on accumulating wealth. There is no such thing as a "prosperity gospel" in the Bible. After all, the greatest commandment of all is "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.*" This was the greatest commandment in the Old Testament, and Jesus simply re-emphasized it, to those who may have forgotten this truth.

For what underlies an unhealthy passion to accumulate wealth, and build bigger barns or purchase more property? It is anxiety and fear of the future, that what we have won't "be enough". With the increasing cost of health care and longer life expectancies, there is a lot more anxiety in our culture about the future. And we are all too familiar with the anxiety and fear being ginned up by politicians this political season, over violence, immigration, changing demographics and threats of terrorism. We have much more anxiety than is reasonable, if you go by statistics – but anxiety and fear are based on perception, not facts. We know this!

Jesus gives you and me a teaching that is totally contrary to what our present human culture teaches us: *that when we are anxious about our present and future, the answer is to share with one another and to place our faith in God – not in the "financial security that bigger barns and investments can bring" – for that is an illusion.* You can't take a barn – or your portfolio – with you!

In an age when there is so much fear and anxiety, do you and I dare to trust in God so much? That is the question, isn't it? In a decade when congregations are shrinking in most places in America, when our own church grows smaller and finds our resources "tight", do we dare to trust in God and *be ever more generous in sharing with others?* When our checking account is hard to balance, we give away food, we contribute to a fund to fly one of our own's family from Africa to St. Paul for a new life, we open our doors to families who have lost their housing during the season of Lent, we raise money to give away school supplies to children and emergency kits to women survivors of domestic abuse. As a matter of fact, it is because of our professed faith in this God of grace, that we are challenged so often to *GIVE GENEROUSLY to others* from what we have first received from God. In fact, that is what "stewardship" actually is: to faithfully manage the resources our God has first given us, our time, talent, and treasure, by giving generously to others – for this is how God calls us, and how God provides for all our needs. Which means, that in our personal lives we must live more simply, in order that we can be more generous with our neighbor, out of faithfulness to Jesus' call to serve! Once again: priorities!

So I guess our dilemma today is actually a call to faithfulness to the priorities that God in Christ Jesus has given us. In the next verse, Jesus gives the answer to the anxiety which inspired the persons demand about his inheritance and our own fears today: *Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing....Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."*

What a message to share in this anxious and fearful election season! So do not worry so much, brothers and sisters. Live simply, but also give generously to God and neighbor! For the truth is as we hear in the Prayer of St. Francis: *That it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*" Thanks be to God. Amen.