

August 5, 2007

10th Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 12:13-21

“Rich Fool”

“The old Jack Benny radio program had a sketch of Jack being robbed at gun point. Jack Benny was reported to be the tightest man alive. In the sketch the robber says to Jack, “Hey bud, your money or your life.” He got no reply. He said, “Hey, I said your money or your life.” Jack replied, “Don’t rush me. I’m thinking it over!”

Money and life are pretty closely intertwined. Most of us differ from Jack Benny in valuing our life more than our money, but in the world we live in it is hard to deny the importance we put on money.

Walking down Riverside Drive I am impressed by the large expensive homes; seeing a large yacht out on the water catches my eye; an expensive car goes by and I watch it go down the street; we get a tour of a condo next to ours which is a lot bigger and nicer and all of a sudden we feel some envy.

In the economic sphere we praise companies where each quarter their profits have increased from the previous quarter; we look for yearly increases in our country’s Gross National Product as one important indicator of the well being of Canada. Money is a significant measuring stick of achievement, hard work, success, in our world.

On one level I have trouble seeing what is wrong with the farmer in our parable today. He works hard, things have gone favourably for him. His cup overflows. He finds there is not enough room in his barns to store his crops. He does what any smart business person would do. You don't want your crop rotting, you seize the opportunity to grow your company. Surely a wise decision that is made every day by small businesses. Here's an opportunity to grow, so the farmer tears down his barns and builds bigger ones. Who wouldn't?!

And just to show that he hasn't become a workaholic, he decides to ease off on all the hard work he has been doing. Take some time to stop and smell the roses. Spend time with his wife and children, perhaps learn to play golf. He has been very successful financially, so he shifts his philosophy to "relax, eat, drink and be merry". Winters in Florida; cruises; "all work and no play makes a dull boy!". Seems like our farmer is a pretty smart guy.

So it comes as kind of a shock when one night as the farmer sits with his feet up looking out at the back forty and the big beautiful barns full of grain that he hears a voice. And it's not any voice, it's God speaking. And God isn't offering songs of praise to the farmer. The first thing God says to the self-satisfied and relaxed farmer is: "You Fool!"

That must have shaken the farmer out of his revelry. Maybe it was the wine speaking! Nobody has called him a fool for a long time. In fact, people walking past his large, shining new barns full to overflowing with grain were mighty impressed at how well he had done for himself. He had taken that small rinky-dink farm and built it up to a first class operation, bigger than anything for miles around.

Doesn't seem like anything remotely foolish about that.

"You Fool" says God. He's been called many things in his day but not often has he been called a fool. God says: "You fool, this very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, where will they be?"

The stakes are high. The farmer's life is in the balance and all the time and energy he has put into his barns and his crops, all the things he has worked

at, won't be going with him. He has missed the boat. He has been working at things that have given him material gain and security, but they will do him no good now. To use Robert Frost's poetic imagery, the farmer during his life chose to do down the popular path of material prosperity, but it has been a path that does not lead to abundant life, it is the path of fools. We too are fools if we store up treasures for ourselves but are not rich toward God.

Will Willimon tells the following story: "I was in on a discussion of Christianity and homosexuality. A number of speakers defended their opposition to homosexuality on the basis of their defence of the American family. Then a pastor rose and said, "I've never had a family destroyed by a homosexual. I suppose it could happen. I've seen dozens of marriages ruined and families devastated by simple greed – working too many hours, buying too much, getting too deep in debt. You want to save the American family, do something about our greed."

The farmer in our parable is a self-made man with a pretty large ego. There are a lot of "I's" in his talk.

"I will do this....

I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods.....

I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink and be merry".....

He talks to himself, he works by himself, he is taking care of the future of himself. There is no talk of sharing what he has with others; nor is there any talk of being thankful to God for his blessings. It's all about him; not others, not God. Just big barns in the picture – mine, all mine.

We are fools if we store up treasures for ourselves and are not rich towards God.

"Helder Camara working with the poor in Brazil has said: "I used to think when I was a young priest that Christ had exaggerated when he warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how hard it is to

be rich and still possess the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on our eyes, a dangerous way of freezing our hands, eyes, lips and hearts.”

“Life is not addition but multiplication. And if you multiply hundred expensive things times the zero inside of you, you still end up with zero.”

“The farmer was a fool, Jesus implied, because he actually thought that he could secure his life on the basis of his stuff. Get the stuff piled high enough, deep enough, it’s a barrier against death and misfortune. And for such thinking, God calls him a fool.”

“Willimon says: “I know a young man, a youth minister who was serving a conservative Christian church. He led the youth into a number of controversial activities – anti-abortion protests, any-drug rallies, and picketing at a movie theatre. The youth responded well to his ministry and the youth group grew. Then one day he appeared in my office to tell me that he had been unceremoniously fired. Why?

He had simply made a videotape containing a collection of TV commercials. Then, at the youth meeting that Sunday evening, he showed the tape and led the youth in a discussion of these TV advertisements, discussing the ways in which television tries to lure us into the acquisition, hoarding, and grabbing of things that TV tells us will make our lives better. They discussed what this sort of getting and buying does to our families and to our souls.

The next week he was fired. He was told by the senior pastor, “that was a foolish thing to do.”

What do you think Jesus would have called it?”

Our story this morning is only found in Luke’s gospel. Frequently Luke speaks about the danger of possessions. In Luke 9:25 we read: “For what does it profit a person if they gain the whole world and lose or forfeit themselves.”

“The thrust of this parable is a critique of persons who live their lives with the wrong set of values or the wrong set of ultimate concerns.

Greed leads to an accumulation of material goods and things ultimately control our lives so that we are not free to live toward God.”

As it says in I Timothy 6:6-10: “Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be

content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many pains.”

The other New Testament reading for today is from Colossians 3:1-11. I will close with a paraphrase of this text from Colossians from “Good as New: A Radical Retelling of the Scriptures” by John Henson. “You have come out of the grave with Jesus, so make sure you enjoy his new life. You can share his special relationship with God. Don’t get bogged down in trivial matters. Since your experience of death and rebirth, your life is one with the ongoing life of God. When the curtain goes back to reveal the reality behind everything, Jesus will be seen as the key to life, and you’ll be there, in his company. Get rid of those things that don’t fit in with your new life: irresponsible relationships, selfish motives, the desire to control and manipulate others. Don’t be greedy for more and more personal possessions. That’s a false religion. God will deal severely with those who make the wrong choices. You made all the wrong choices at one time. You led a really dreadful life. It’s time to put the past behind you, including bad temper, angry words, prejudice, gossip and name-calling. Don’t tell lies to one another. You used to be lies all over, like a set of clothes. You’ve got new clothes now. You’re learning to look how God meant you to be. In your new clothes, there are no differences of race, religion, culture, or class. Your relationship with Jesus is all that matters. You each have a family likeness to him!”

Amen. Thanks be to God!