

Rich toward God

sermon digest

July 13, 2008

Luke 12:13-21
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Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on our personal and congregational commitment of stewardship: *As members of the body of Christ, we covenant to love one another as God in Christ has loved us. We will be stewards of our gifts and possessions, supporting the fellowship and mission of the church with offerings of money and self. Property and program shall be servant rather than lord of the church's faith and mission.*

A European visitor to our country summed up his journey to America with an interesting observation about the evident prosperity gifting our country and the seemingly incongruent cloud that it seemed to put over the heads of so many people: "Americans cleave to things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them. They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight."

Do the visitor's words ring true? Is this the America you know and I know? Did our guest make his way down Wall Street when things were booming or perhaps view a few episodes of "The Lifestyle of the Rich and Famous?" Did he ride in a few Hummers while in the United States and spend a few nights in some of our upscale hotels with their excellent cuisine? Or did he merely spend the night in a Motel 6 and observe the advertisements that make their regular course across our TV screens?

Actually, no. Our mystery writer visited America in the 1830's, long before Hummers and TV's and even the emergence of McDonald's. And lest our national pride get the best of us, we should note that Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political thinker and historian, author of *Democracy in America*, goes on to observe that the spectacle of "so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance . . . is as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing it" [*Democracy in America*, 508].

The struggle with materialism certainly is not new. An ancient story that has made its rounds through a number of cultures relates the tale of an old hermit who one day stumbled upon a cave and an enormous hidden treasure. Fleeing the cave as quickly as he could, he encountered three men who questioned his hurry.

"I am fleeing the devil!" he shouted.

Amused, they humored him. "Show us," they urged.

Protesting every step of the way, the hermit took the men to the cave. "Here," he said. "Here is the death that is running after me."

Recognizing the value of what they saw, the men gladly sent the hermit on his way and began conniving about what they would do with the treasure. Recognizing the need for tools and sustenance, they sent one man to get what they needed. Desiring to have the entire treasure for himself, the man decided on his way into town to put poison in the food and eliminate the other two. Of course, the other two while he was gone had time to plan the elimination of the third man. On the man's return, they immediately murdered him, and then sat down to celebrate their victory and enjoy the food—a meal, which, of course, turned out to be their last. When they ingested the poison, they, too, died; and the treasure remained where it was.

Is that the way it is with material things? Are they indeed deadly, worthy of being hidden safely away in caves so as not to endanger our very lives? Are they, in the words of one contemporary writer, "hazmats"—hazardous material to be handled with extreme care?

The material world is a good gift which can bode ill. The interpretation of the material world in Hebrew scriptures as the creation of a good God is foundational for Jews and Christians. "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Care in the use of God's gift and caution about its misuse is, however, also a dominant theme. Jim Wallis, founder and director of Sojourners, tells of his experience along with other first year seminary students in cutting from the Bible all references to the care and use of things. The students found verses on the poor and God's response to injustice to be the second most prominent theme in Hebrew scriptures—the first being idolatry, often interrelated with the matter of possessions. They found one of every sixteen verses in the New Testament to be about the poor or the subject of money. In the first three gospels, it is one out of ten verses, and in the book of Luke, it is one in seven. Their conclusion: the Bible minus its teachings about the disposition of material things is "a book full of holes" [*God's Politics*, 211].

Luke's story about the farmer and his construction of barns is one of three parables about possessions found only in Luke. Interestingly, not just Luke but stories and sayings from Jewish, Egyptian and Greco-Roman sources indicate a similar issue with the question of greed. The familiar adage, "You can't take it with you," and the more current "There are no

U-Hauls behind hearses" is matched by the Arabic saying, "There are no pockets in a shroud." The transitory nature of riches and the concept of death as the great equalizer are cross cultural concerns.

The placement of the parable in Luke holds a key to its interpretation. Jesus, Luke says, has just "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51) where he will surely die. Along the way, he is giving his disciples critical last minute instruction on the meaning of discipleship. In chapter twelve, he talks with them about persecution, possessions and his coming return; and just as he is urging calm in the face of persecution, a jealous brother cuts in with the demand that Jesus make the older brother share his inheritance. It is, as one writer has put it, "crunch time," and here the man is whining for his fare share of the pie. Jesus' refuses to settle the man's case, although as a respected teacher, it would have been thoroughly appropriate for him to do so. Why?

Be sure that Jesus is not saying that matters of justice do not matter. We have far too many instances in which Jesus has spoken powerfully to the matter of injustice.

Be sure that Jesus is not saying that having one's physical needs met is unimportant. In the words to follow he speaks to the God who recognizes and supplies our physical needs, and in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus a short time later, he acknowledges that in their lifetime, the Rich Man had "good things" while poor Lazarus received only "evil things" (16:25). We should be clear that if Jesus in the gospel of Luke blesses the poor, he does not bless poverty.

Perhaps Jesus' refusal to intervene in the brother's dispute is just this: In light of the cross, in light of the insistent demand of discipleship, the brother's hurt feelings pale into insignificance. Just like the farmer in the parable, the younger brother is totally preoccupied with himself. Carrying on a conversation within himself, the farmer says, "What should I do, for I have no place to store *my* crops? . . . I will do this: I will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones." The brother's self-absorption has blinded him to the larger drama going on around him. He is blind to the kingdom of God unfolding right there before him. Separate from the light shed upon them by the unfolding of God's kingdom, things cannot find their proper place, for in the final analysis things given by God become our offering back to the one who gave them.

Money and possessions matter in the kingdom of God and Christ's church. The parable of the farmer indicates the potential for a very different ending. Like the farmer, we are presented alternatives. Like the farmer and the brother, we can be locked up within ourselves, focused upon hoarding treasures for ourselves; or, in Jesus' words we can be "rich toward God." Preoccupation with material things can create a chasm between us and others as well as us and God. The Christian life, on the other hand, is lived outward, toward God and others. The good news of the gospel, including the good news of Luke's parable, is that the decisions we make do matter. In a world of so much pain and so much suffering, budgets, in the words of Jim Wallis, become nothing less than "moral documents." Whether they are our own personal budgets or our shared budgets—the budget of our nation or our church—the potential for budgets to help mend the world are matters of great concern.

Our daughter, visiting from Kentucky last week, shared with us concern for a child she counsels in the school system who has no place to call home. Everyday he comes to school with his backpack packed with his belongings so that he can light in one of three different locations at the end of the day.

Several weeks ago, Terri Gilbert shared with our Faith in Action Commission her own concern for students who come to school hungry on Monday mornings. Cut off from the free lunches that take care of them at school, they do not have enough to eat on weekends.

Many of our children are not doing well in our community and in our world. As someone has put it, there is a lot of mending in our world that needs to be done, and no stitch is too small. Faithfulness demands that we as individuals and as congregations do the mending that is so desperately needed.

We have pledged in our church covenant to "be stewards of our gifts and possessions, supporting the fellowship and mission of the church with offerings of money and self." "Property and program," we vow, "shall be servant rather than lord of the church's faith and mission." As with every aspect of our covenant, interpreting those commitments in practical terms as we make decisions about budget, building and program will determine whether we abide by those ideals or forsake them. We are caught in the delicate balance of providing for the needs of our congregation and its mission and the needs of the world that lies around us. If we are to continue as a congregation, we must provide for some of the "necessities," yet, as a body of Christ, we cannot discount the crying needs of the community and world that surrounds us.

The use of money and the needs of the poor play a dominant role in scripture, and they play an equally significant role in the life of a congregation. We will consider buildings and utilities and programs, but we dare not close our ears or minimize the cries of those beyond our doors. "Nobody," James Forbes, emeritus pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, observes, "gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor!" (Wallis, 16). Neither do churches.

Are we up to the challenge? It all depends. Where is our treasure? Will we commit ourselves to being rich toward God or merely rich?