

## I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT...

### *How Much is Enough?*

Luke 12:13-21

August 13, 2023

Commencement speeches are rarely memorable. They tend to be (can I say this?) preachy and are often filled with platitudes and even cringey moments. Therefore, exceptions are notable. Ten years ago, the columnist David Brooks spoke to the graduating class of the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. The speech is well worth your time, easily accessible on YouTube. Brooks eloquently reflects on the meaning of life with a mix of humor and solid research from the social sciences. At one point, reflecting on what brings fulfillment in life, Brooks gives sage advice to these graduates, advice that will come as no surprise to those of you who have chosen to gather for worship on a Sunday morning. He says, "Join a group that meets (at least) once a month. That produces the same happiness gain as doubling your income. Use what money you have to buy experiences, not things."<sup>i</sup>

I always find it gratifying when research confirms what we already know in our hearts and what scripture teaches us. Life is not about an abundance of things. Wise guidance. Practical advice. Biblical truth.

And yet. You and I live in the real world, where much is measured by financial gain and the acquisition of things. Remaining for just a moment on the subject of higher education, I've been disappointed in recent debates on university admission policies by the uncontested assumption that elite schools are those that result in the highest earnings among their graduates, not the virtues learned, the character shaped, the community formed by the experience. These seem to me an

accurate reflection of how we actually measure success, regardless of what we may tell ourselves... or our graduates. The point was driven home for me this week when a friend sent me a piece with the ominous title, "Rot of Nation's Core Values Quantified by Single Poll." The results of that poll, which has been conducted for decades now, signify tectonic shifts in what Americans say matters most. Values like community involvement, religious participation, and patriotism have seen dramatic drops in the last five years, while the importance of only one priority has grown. Money.

Back to the text. A stranger asks Jesus for some help with an argument he's having over inheritance. More to the point, the man wants Jesus, who has the authority of a teacher, to command his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Predictably if you've met Jesus, the teacher challenges the premise of the request. He undercuts our inclination to equate possessions with purpose. And then he tells a story for all those in the crowd to hear.

It's a challenging story, especially for us, with our cultural emphasis on acquisition and consumption, the unchallenged mythology that claims that life consists precisely in the abundance of possessions or, if not their abundance, at least having the right possessions. We function in this way even while acknowledging the futility of our approach. We are enticed. We are beguiled by the cleverness of advertisers. We are easily convinced that possessions will fill the gaps we feel in purpose and fulfillment. And of course, it never works. It is *never* enough. There are only two characters in the parable. There

is a man who has great resources, and there is God. We would call this man successful. He is a strategic, prudent businessman. He does not become wealthy by immoral or illegal means. His land produces abundantly, and he aims to secure his future. Not a bad person. Certainly not the caricature of corporate largess. And yet, in the parable, God addresses the man as a fool. Why?

Remember the first words of Jesus to the man in the crowd: "Be on your guard against all forms of greed." The story of the barn-builder is a warning. A warning about the possessive power of possessions.

The man's anxiety over his material wealth rules his life. It consumes him. His singular driving concern is to build barns large enough to achieve security.

And so, the question must be asked: at what point are those barns large enough? Perhaps when they tower over all the buildings surrounding them? Or when the man is fully insulated from the needs of those standing outside? When he can no longer see his neighbors? When all of his competitors are finally defeated and bowed down in recognition of his triumph? And by the way, how much can one person really use or enjoy? Doesn't grain rot if it goes unused?

Once, a reporter asked John D. Rockefeller, "How much money is enough?" Rockefeller smiled and chuckled a little, and answered, "Just a little more."

The parable is a warning against greed. But it's more than that. It's a meditation on what *does* matter.

Let's look again. The story is dominated by soliloquy. The man speaks exclusively to himself. His monologue consists of sixty words. You don't need to count them. I already did. And twelve of them, one-fifth, are I and my. "These are my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my, my, my." The man has lost all capacity to

see the existence of other people. After all, the man's land does not produce so abundantly without help, hired or otherwise. The man will not tear down and build new barns without the assistance of others. And yet, his focus is entirely on himself. Lying behind his outward greed, the man is guilty of self-absorption driven by fear. Living in his own world for himself, with himself, by himself. As poor in relationship as he is wealthy in things. And when his life is over, those things prove worthless on their own.

The barn-builder belongs to no one. He attends no group that meets at least once a month. Greed is his only companion. Not only has he become alienated from human community, he also has abandoned his relationship with God. The fearful man speaks not to God but only to himself. In the King James Version he says, "Soul, take thine ease." Ironic because ease is precisely what the man will never have.

What ease is there to take when you have no community, no one with whom to eat, drink, and be merry? The cold comfort of material goods surrounds the man. This is what earns him the title *fool*. Rather than dinner with friends, he is stuck on the treadmill of acquisition. Rather than use his resources for experiences with others, the barn-builder builds barns. It is as if he has forgotten there is any other way. His is a tragic story meant to warn all who follow Jesus that our attitude toward possessions is far more important than the amount we possess.

The final question God asks in the parable must have lingered in the mind of the inheritance-seeker at odds with his brother. God asks, "All these things—whose will they be?" Those questions multiply in my mind because I hear them often in my office. Whose will all of this be? What it is all for? How much is enough? Whose will they be in the man's case? The answer is obvious, the question rhetorical. There is no one. His anxious, fearful acquisitiveness has driven everyone else away from him. The beautiful barns will fall into

disrepair. The grain will rot. And the memory of the man will fade away.

But this is not the only way to live. Jesus gives us another choice. Immediately after telling this grim story, he offers a summary: "So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God." What does it mean? How can we be rich toward God? I think we know the answer. It has to do with investing our lives in what matters most instead of what will fade and fail and rot and disappear. It involves using what we have to bless and serve somebody else. It involves looking beyond immediate gratification and instant pleasure to what endures. It involves building a longer table instead of bigger barns.

And so, my friends, at the risk of getting personal (or preachy) I want to suggest that most of the people hearing my voice have enough. That most of us are among those who live in relative comfort—enough to eat, stable housing, security for the future.

And *none* of us will carry that kind of abundance from this life to the next. Regardless of how large the pile is, it will fade and rot and disappear. That is simply a statement of fact, but it is one that provokes a question. Knowing that what we have will not last, what should we do with what we have while it is ours? The good news is Jesus could not have been clearer on this one. Just a little later in Luke's Gospel, he runs into another man—another man who has a question about inheritance. *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus gives simple instruction. *All you have to do is sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and follow after me, for you will have treasure in heaven.* Maybe you remember how that exchange ends. The man becomes very sad, overcome with sadness. Why? Because, in Luke's words, he had many possessions. He was possessed. We are fools. Building bigger barns. Warehouses.

Distribution centers. Self-storage. Walls of division. Towers of isolation. Barriers that keep us from seeing each other. I hear the voice of Jesus. *Enough. Enough.*

What should we, who have more than enough, do with what we have while it is ours? We should break barriers and build communities. There are many ways to do this. Here at Second, we are committed to a compassion that facilitates mutual transformation, not just transaction. And so, I hope you will be here on Tuesday, August the 29th to learn more about our neighbors and to hear about a program designed to build a better Washington Township, a community free of poverty and filled with opportunity. We have a God-given responsibility to share abundance in ways that matter.

Just a few days before he was crucified, Jesus made his way to the temple in Jerusalem. There, surrounded by his disciples, he watched as a poor widow placed two copper coins into the collection plate. Two pennies. It was almost nothing. It was nearly everything she had. And Jesus says to his disciples that her gift means more than the millions of those with abundance. Why? She knew the purpose of possessions. She knew the meaning of enough. Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Amen.

<sup>i</sup><http://www.graduationwisdom.com/speeches/0127-David-Brooks-Baccalaureate-Address-Sewanee-University-of-the-South-2013.htm>