

sermon 8/01/10 Newport Pres. Church  
“A Balancing Act”  
Luke 12:13-21

Pick any book in the Bible, but especially the Gospels, and soon you will read about money. Apparently Jesus cares more about the sins involving money than the “sins,” or at least what some Christians consider sins, that seem to get the most attention in many churches today.

So, if a preacher hopes to be a biblical preacher, then he or she needs to talk about money and greed throughout the year, not just in the fall when churches do their stewardship drives. This, of course, makes all of us do a little squirming. As one scholar has said, money seems to act as a kind of thermostat for issues of anxiety and control. When we start digging into those areas of our lives, we don't always like what we find. Anxiety and control cut pretty close to home. And when we go through difficult economic times, like the one we are in now, anxiety is particularly a relevant issue.

This is a complicated discussion for most churches. We are not all in the same place financially, even in predominately upper middle class churches like Newport. Some are struggling to make ends meet after being laid off or having their salaries cut. Some are on fixed incomes with dwindling savings, or decreasing investments. Some, on the other end of the spectrum, feel deprived when they can't take that trip abroad, or buy that extra luxury item they have been itching to buy. Most of us groan whenever we look at our investment portfolios, if we even have a portfolio, and see how much our investments have dropped in value.

Given all that we enter this passage Luke's gospel. It contains the parable of the rich farmer. Note the good harvest Jesus mentions does not make him rich. He is rich to begin with. But then he experiences a bumper crop. Commentators tell us Jesus is painting a picture of a miracle. The harvest was so large it had to be a miracle. In other words, this rich man was experiencing the reign of God where abundance is the norm.

But, sadly, the farmer does not recognize the hand of God in this bumper crop. He just sees the harvest as “my crops.” This abundance is all his doing. He deserves this good fortune. It's his land, isn't it? There is absolutely no hint of this being a gift from God.

It does lead to an inner dialogue. It sounds a bit stilted when we read it. Most of us don't talk to our souls as this farmer does. “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. . .” Still it is an effective technique to help us enter into the inner life of this rich farmer.

The first question he asks himself is actually not a bad question. “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” The trouble is the answer he gives himself to that question. He could have said, I have more than I need. I'll give some of it away to those in need. Instead he tries to figure out how he can keep this gift all to himself. How can this gift make my life easier, make my future secure, allow me to relax, eat, drink and be merry?

Commentators point out how self-focused he is. He only talks to himself. He does not seek counsel from anyone, let alone God. His inner dialogue reveals a deep-seated greed. Greed is a

problem, as one scholar notes, because greed is all about self-focus, about meeting my needs. It prevents us from being rich toward God. Ultimately greed is idolatrous. When we make financial security and possessions our ultimate concern by the amount of time and emotional energy we give to them, we make them a god.

Jesus has God call this rich farmer a fool. We should not take that lightly. Elsewhere in the gospels (Matt. 5:22) we hear Jesus saying, “If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” For God to call this rich man a fool is very serious business.

Why does Jesus condemn this farmer so vehemently? Is there anything wrong with creating a nest egg so we might enjoy our retirement? Is being rich a sin in and of itself? What is Jesus trying to say in this parable?

Scholars point out this text does not offer us rules as to what is the correct amount to save for the future, or how much wealth can we accumulate before it begins to look like greed. Wouldn't we love a rule book like that? At least we would know where we stood. That would give us some control, and don't we all like that? It would allow us to judge others who have more than we do.

Instead Jesus gives us a story that offers us images that prod the imagination. That is the great thing, and the frustrating thing, about parables. We are left scratching our heads and wondering what the point is. Hopefully we are pushed to discuss our questions with the community of faith. Hopefully we will see the tension Jesus is asking us to live with in trying to be good stewards of God's abundant gifts.

Basically Jesus is calling us to live as if life was a balancing act. We need to struggle with the balance between being frugal and saving for the future with being good stewards and being generous with what we share with others. It is a balancing act between being rich enough to have our needs (not necessarily all our wants) met and being rich toward God. We get into the area of sin when we forget this balancing act and think only about our needs.

The crucial question this leaves for Christians is this: what does it mean to be rich toward God? What would that look like? How do we get there? If we spent half as much time trying to be rich toward God as we do caring about our finances, think about how that would change our lives and the world.

Fortunately Luke gives us a whole host of examples of what it would look like being rich toward God. Look at the actions of the Good Samaritan in chapter ten. Look at Mary, also in chapter ten, listening to Jesus, capturing the moment, and not just fussing about the work in the kitchen, as did her sister Martha.

Look at what immediately follows our text in chapter twelve. We are asked to prayerfully trust that God will provide. Jesus says we are to stop worrying excessively about having enough. We should not make decisions out of our own anxiety. We are asked to sell some of our possessions and give alms.

Being rich toward God is all about priorities. What activities fill our calendars? Do we save enough energy for our families or our faith commitments? When we plan our household budgets, are we generous with those in need, or do we scrimp on generosity to make sure all our wants are met? It is about a non-anxious presence as we make our way through our days. There are no hard and fast rules as to how we go about that. We are just asked to enter into the tension between taking care of ourselves and our families, and caring for the least of God's children.

As we take communion this Sunday, as we partake of this symbolic meal reminding us of all the good gifts God gives to us, gifts we did not earn or deserve, may our eating and drinking this meal be a time to commit to pondering the balancing act in our own lives. We would be fools to ignore this parable. Amen