

The Stuff Complex  
Luke 12.13-21  
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In the Gospel this Lord's Day, Jesus is confronted by someone who appears to be embroiled in a family feud. If you're Jesus, you're going to get all sorts of questions. This one comes from a man who wants Jesus to settle a dispute: "Teacher," he says, "tell my brother (we don't know if the brother is present or not . . . ) tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

"Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" Jesus says. And he avoids any act of adjudication whatsoever with the man and his brother.

However, he does proceed to offer caution about greed. Perhaps he has a sense of the man's ulterior motive. I'm thinking that Jesus simply chooses not to engage in resolving something picky and particular – which the brothers themselves can do. But there is the deeper concern to which he speaks. Jesus is deliberate in saying: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed . . ."

And he proceeds to tell this parable about a rich man whose land produced abundantly. The only question – the only question -- the rich man asks is "where should I store my burgeoning –larger than expected–crops?" And the only answer – the only answer – the man comes up with is: "I will build larger barns!"

And then after his self-absorbed question and answer, upon the building of the barns, comes his declaration – he says to himself he says: (Who else would such a self-absorbed person be talking to, but himself . . . ?) "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry!"

Then, we hear the voice of God who says: "You fool!"

Now, this is the only time in the Bible we hear anything so disparaging from Jesus to, or about, anybody. In other previous moments . . . Sure, he's angry when the Jerusalem Temple is made into a marketplace; remember, that's where he turned over the tables. And yes, he's perturbed and petulant with Peter, there in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter strikes the Roman guard. And, oh my God, in the moments on the way to the Cross, when he's called into the Roman governor's chamber: Jesus stands before Pilate's pathos and power, what must he be feeling? Yet, he is silent . . .

But this parable is the only incident when we hear any kind of adjective, much less an expletive, directed to or at a person by Jesus – "You fool." It is a comment – as Jesus presents it, from God; it's directed at a person in the context of the parable. If anyone can quote or paraphrase God, Jesus can . . .

Yet, right up there with his turning of the tables in the Temple, this is as impassioned in reproach as Jesus gets. It's about accumulated wealthy and property. To be sure, land and its produce were certainly the pre-eminent forms of wealth in biblical times.

So it is – you could say -- that the parable that Jesus tells about the rich fool is about *stuff*, the accumulation of *stuff*.

I'm reminded of that George Carlin routine – the comic monologue – about “stuff” and the space we just have to have for our stuff, and – as the stuff increases, the more space we need for it . . . It's enough to make you laugh, and Carlin does. But it's quite serious for the rich man, who is bent on building just for the sake of storing it. He doesn't understand that there is anything else he would do.

I am reminded of the story of a CEO on vacation who was stunned to find a fisherman lying idly beside his boat. "Why aren't you out fishing?" said the exec. "Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman. "Why don't you catch some more?" "What would I do with more?" "You could earn more money. Then you could have a motor put into your boat and you could go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you still more fish, and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats ... maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me." "What would I do then?" "Then you could really enjoy life." The fisherman responds: "What do you think I am doing right now?"

The CEO was caught up in net gains and accumulations, unable to see anything else, but . . . But himself. Like the rich man, his means were only there to further his end, and once there to further it, further.

Note that Jesus doesn't criticize what it is that the rich man accumulates – which by the way comes as a result of the blessing of the land and its fertility, not the rich man's ingenuity, technique or technology – like, say, the technology of underwater drilling.

This parable of Jesus is not a matter of things or stuff itself. But it's what we do with what we have: that's of concern here. How foolish he is, and we are as well, when what we do is focus on how we will acquire and keep what we have . . . reinforcing the means, and extending the end (or trying to) by which we get what we can.

All this has been a matter of great discussion over the years among Christians and the life of faith. “You can't take it with you” is certainly a baseline.

Considering the Earth's bounty and humankind's folly, Gandhi said: “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.”

The parable teaches that riches may not be the root of all evil, but it is the love of money/riches which is. Jesus speaks of it – our treatment of – as potentially idolatry:

giving it that kind of attention, substituting the riches for God, for “wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

John Wesley, that faithful founder of Methodism took it to heart to say “Christians should earn all they can, save all they can, give all they can.”

Jesus doesn't offer a prescription or formula for how you might do that. Just as he avoids any adjudication with the brothers over their inheritance. But he cautions and contends against the greed that accumulates all for self . . . how foolish it is . . . but to realize what we have received, even by toil and our own efforts, as a gift, and to share and give . . . is to be rich toward God . . . Amen.

Notes:

- *Human sin abounds in any economic system. To date, no one has found an economic system that remedies greed or selfishness. Christian faith inevitably stands in judgment of all economic systems.*
- In all the other episodes where Jesus is confronted with questions or people trying to trap or trip him up, he's gracious and good. Instead of a “slam” or a “dis” elsewhere he responds with the story of the Good Samaritan to the young lawyer who seeks eternal life and likewise he says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a richman to inherit eternal life.
- In response to the man (Luke 12.21): It's not like Jesus says, “Oh by the way, now that you mention it, let me point out to you . . .”, Jesus confronts us what we do with what we have. He cautions, chides (rails?) against greed.
- Gandhi's 7 deadly sins:
  - Wealth without Work
  - Pleasure without Conscience
  - Science without Humanity
  - Knowledge without Character
  - Politics without Principle
  - Commerce without Morality
  - Worship without Sacrifice

“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.” Gandhi

“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe.” Einstein

*Preface to the reading of today's Gospel:* Two boys starting arguing over who would get the first pancake. Their mother, thinking that this would be a good teaching moment, said: "If Jesus were sitting here. He would say: "Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait." The older brother turned to his younger brother and said: "OK, you be Jesus .  
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