

Bruton Parish Church
 Sunday, August 1, 2010 (Year C Proper 13)
 The Rev. Daniel T. Avery

The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)

“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones.”

Jesus had an attitude about possessions. The late comedian George Carlin had an attitude about stuff. Have you heard his monologue? He calls it “a place for my stuff.”¹ Here’s part of it:

“...all you need in life, is a little place for my stuff, ya know? I can see it on your table, everybody’s got a little place for your stuff. This is my stuff, that’s your stuff, that’ll be his stuff over there.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody’s got a little pile of stuff...And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn’t want anybody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff...All they want is the shiny stuff. That’s what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff!

Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.”

George Carlin got his attitude about stuff by simply observing our culture. There is hope when we can laugh about the consuming realities of our lives!

Jesus told the crowd a parable where “land produced abundantly.” But what do we know about land producing abundantly? Some of us do use our land for gardens, but this man was a farmer and his life depended on the land. Only a few of us know about farming and abundant crops, so let’s use something we do know about. George Carlin reminds us, we know about stuff!

The centerpiece of our gospel reading today is the parable of the rich fool. It is one of many that reveals Jesus’ attitude about stuff. Jesus exhorts, “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of stuff.” Stuff includes anything we think is ours: wealth, assets, goods, belongings...stuff!

So the parable reads for us like this: “A certain rich fellow found himself with more stuff than he needed. So he held a meeting with himself and he said, ‘What shall I do? I have everything I need and a lot more. I don’t have room enough to store anymore stuff.’ Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: (I will start by going through my stuff like jewelry and neckties and put everything I don’t really need in bags and take it to the Bruton Parish Shop for the Pre-Owned Accessories Sale because it is a huge hit every Labor Day Weekend and pure profit for Bruton’s Outreach and Mission ministries! No, I am getting ahead of my self...that is for later. Back to the parable!) I’ll sell my house and build a bigger one in which I’ll store all I can possibly save. And I will say to myself, ‘Self, you’ve got enough stuff stashed away to do you a long time. Recline, dine, wine, and shine!’ But God said to him, ‘You nitwit, at this very moment your stuff is consuming your soul. All these things you’ve worked for, to whom shall they really belong?’ That’s the way it is with those who pile up stuff for themselves without giving God a thought.”²

¹ <http://babyboomerflashback.blogspot.com/2008/04/george-carlin-on-stuff.html>

² <http://rockhay.tripod.com/cottonpatch/luke.htm#chapter12>

Jesus got his attitude about stuff from observing his culture and having his mind formed in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures that “denounced the amassing of wealth at the expense of the poor.” Luke’s Jesus reflects the prophetic stance with his scathing rebuke of (the worship of stuff) and the way he entered the life of the despised poor.³ He took an uncompromising stance against wealth and insisted that his disciples divest themselves of their stuff. Luke’s Jesus is ideally suited to speak to us modern American Christians and we are free just as insistently to ignore it at our own peril. Jesus’ message is so counter-cultural that we rarely give it a thought.

“The rich man in this parable was rich because he had many crops. He was a fool because he thought his stuff secured his life ‘for many years to come.’”⁴ God says to him, “This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

Let’s look a little closer here. Who or what is “this very night” taking this rich man’s life. The Greek word used here is literally a third-person plural: “they will demand.” The subject is unstated. Is God taking his life or is it the man’s stuff that is demanding his life? It is usually understood as God demanding the man’s soul. But staring us in the face as an alternative is the consuming reality that it is none other than the man’s possessions themselves that are demanding his life.⁵ His stuff has taken over his life. We become enamored of our stuff, infatuated as a lover might become infatuated, and give our hearts to what we call ours. Instead of possessing stuff, our stuff begins to possess us. This rich man is possessed by his stuff. Our stuff imprisons us in our own cares. This is why Jesus tells his disciples to divest themselves of their stuff.

Note also how the pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my” dominate the parable. The rich man is concerned only for himself, not for his neighbors, not for those who have no land to produce their own, not for the alien, no for the homeless at the margins of society (e.g., Exodus 22:21-22), not for any whose lives are at risk due to their limited access to resources. In the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus was formed by and in the development of the church over the centuries, the act of giving to the poor remains a central element of participating in the life of God. The man in the parable is so self-centered, however, he cannot see beyond what he considers as “his” harvest, “his” barns, and “his own” life.

The goal of the Christian life is to participate in the life of God. To participate in God’s life is to “live beyond the small prison of our own cares.”⁶ For many of us this requires a reorientation of our lives from “stuff for us” to “adequate stuff for all.”

And, yes, we might even start this week in a very small if token way by going through our small stuff like jewelry and neckties and taking things we don’t really need to the Bruton Parish Shop for the Pre-Owned Accessories Sale to be held Labor Day Weekend. The money does go to Bruton’s Outreach and Mission ministries where some among us have discerned needs and places where our life as a church might reach “beyond the small prison of our own cares.”

Our gospel this morning is all about the stewardship of our abundance. Are we to be about stuffing ourselves or about seeking to be freed from the prison of our own cares and abundance of stuff? Participating in the life of God as Jesus calls us to do is the hope of the future. May God give us the strength to hope and participate in God’s life! Thanks be to God!

³ Arthur Simon, *How Much is Enough?: Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003, p.121.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. In *Sacra Pagina*, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Editor, Vol. 3. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 201.

⁵ Frank Stagg, *Studies in Luke’s Gospel*. Nashville: Convention Press, 1965, pp.90-91.

⁶ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes all the Difference*. Harper One.