

June 14, 2020
Dedication Sunday
Thirteenth Sunday of Online Worship

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Acts 4:32-37

Acts 2:13-21

The Things We Hold

He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. – Acts 4:37

Have you ever noticed that when the Bible introduces someone, that person is usually holding something? Joseph, the Levite from Cyprus, the one nicknamed “Barnabas,” arrived holding money he made from selling a field.

Now this was no a small offering Barnabas made to the church. Land in the Middle East has always been held in families and passed on from one generation to the next as an inheritance. That deep connection to the land is a major factor in the current conflict in the Middle East, as more and more Palestinian land has been annexed for Israeli settlements.

Barnabas went against the custom of his people; he sold his land. He first appeared in the story of the New Testament Church holding a gift of great value that he intended for the work of the church. He wasn't the first one to do that.

Craig Barnes, president of Princeton seminary noted that when new characters show up in the Bible they are typically holding something very meaningful to them, something they cling to, something they're betting their lives on.

Abraham was clinging to what little family he had. Moses was holding on to a shepherd staff. David had a slingshot. Some of the disciples were holding fishing nets when Jesus met them. A young boy was holding five loaves and two fish, and a poor widow held her last two copper coins. Sometimes it's a little; sometimes it's a lot.¹

We are all holding on to something. For some of us it's a dream or an aspiration, a profession or a relationship, maybe even a possession. We hold these things very tightly because they help us feel grounded and secure. There's nothing wrong with that; this world is a dangerous place, and we've had too much of what we hold dear ripped from our hands lately.

Business owners are holding on to their customers and employees. Church members are holding on to each other, and to our missions, our programs, and our staff. Educators are holding on to their students, and families are holding on to their cherished gatherings.



My family and I have been holding on to the dream of the sabbatical I'm supposed to have this summer, time for travel and study. The travel portion of my sabbatical can't happen, not this summer. It isn't safe. The travel will have to wait until 2021, or until there's a vaccine.

I'll be able to complete the study portion of my sabbatical in about 6 weeks this summer, and during that time you'll love the preaching series the associate pastors and Elizabeth have planned for you.

But I have to tell you, it's been hard to let go of my sabbatical plans. I've been holding on to those plans for years now. Still, compared to what some have lost in this strange time, I've had to let go of very little.

What about you? If the Bible writers were introducing you today, what would you be holding? Would it be a gift like Barnabas'? Or a child, like Hagar? Would you be holding on to your job, or a hobby, or a diploma? Craig Barnes says that some of us are holding on to hurt from long ago, or fear about the future. I expect that's right.

Jesus told a very famous story about a man who was holding on to too much. He was a success by the standards of his time and ours. But, Jesus called him a fool. Listen to the gospel reading from Luke 12: 13-21:

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And [Jesus] said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Why did Jesus call this man a fool? He seems so ...well...normal. He was a farmer whose land produced abundantly. Isn't that the point of farming? He made money— there's no indication that he did anything dishonest or even questionable. He saved. Most of us don't save enough, and we worry about that, at least I do. Not this guy. He was in high cotton.

So why did Jesus call him "fool?" You can't hear it in the English translation, but what Jesus called him is much stronger than "fool." It would be ill advised for me to say what it actually means in a family service. To give you some idea, in the previous chapter Jesus used the same word to describe mean-spirited, intransigent Pharisees.ⁱⁱ

So what's going on here? What's this farmer holding on to, or what is it that's holding onto him?

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached one of his most famous sermons on this parable. He named three reasons he believed Jesus used this man as a warning and example of what NOT to do with our lives.

Dr. King's sermons are wonderful and long – 45 minutes at least. I think we ought to start having 45 minute sermons here. No? Okay, I'll summarize.

Martin Luther King, Jr said that Jesus called this man a fool because he failed to make a distinction between his outer life, and his life within. He was holding on to the idea that what he owned was everything that matters –larger and larger barns, so to speak, or in our case the car, or the boat, or the house with the nice kitchen, and all the other things we cherish – all those are part of our outer lives. And how we hold on to our outer lives...so tightly that we neglect our inner lives –our spiritual lives, our moral lives, and our relationships -- with nature, and others, and God.

Jesus warns us clearly – *Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.* He knew that the richer we became materially, the poorer most of us became spiritually, and the more likely we would be to take advantage of those who have less. Money is power and power corrupts.

“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”
That's what Jesus said.

King also pointed out that, “This man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others,”ⁱⁱⁱ and his responsibility to his neighbors. Thirteen times in this passage the rich fool says “I” or “me” or “my”...not once does he say “we” or “us” or “ours.”

This man is a fool because he doesn't understand – these are King's words:

“All life is interrelated. We are tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality and whatever affects one ... affects all. As long as there is poverty in the world, no [one] can be ... rich, even if he has a billion dollars ... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”

The third reason Jesus called this man a fool was his arrogance -- he failed to realize that everything he had had come from God. He failed to realize his dependence upon God. He “talked as if he regulated the seasons. He talked as if he produced the rain. He talked as if he controlled the setting and the rising of the sun.

“This man was a fool,” King said, because he acted like he was the creator instead of the creature. “He sought to live life without a sky.”^{iv}

The fool holds on to a “practical atheism, living as if there were no God... he believes he owes no one anything. [He] affirms God with his lips but denies God with his life. “This,” said Dr. King “is an even greater type of atheism and a more dangerous type.”^v

That’s so true. So what’s the prescription? What’s the cure? Jesus has a clear remedy and he doesn’t hesitate to share it. The cure is generosity, an open hand. In the very next verse that follows this parable Jesus says:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear...instead, seek first God’s kingdom, and all these things will be yours as well.^{vi}

He also said:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.^{vii}

In the reading from Acts we hear that the early Christians discovered God’s grace in generosity. *And there was not a needy person among them* because of it...not just Barnabas, but all of them. They shared.

I love this graphic. This is one of the many reasons I give to God at Woods. My husband and I have our intention card right there alongside yours. We’ve said that we are going to try to increase our giving this year – because the need is great.



A wise person said, “An open hand is better than an open mouth.”

In a few minutes we will pray and ask God to bless all our giving intentions and plans. If you don’t have a card here, you can fill one out by clicking on “Intention Card” at the top right on our web page at woodschurch.org.

David and Sarah Thompson and the rest of the Stewardship Team are not asking you to put down any amount this year, but simply to share your intention – to increase what you are currently giving, to continue your current giving, to give for the first time or, if you need -- to decrease.

We just ask that you let us know, so that we can be true to our staff and our mission partners... and so that everything we do at Woods will give glory and thanks to God.

My card says “increase” because that’s my aspiration, not because I have more these days – nobody does, as far as I know. My card says “increase” because that’s how I want to live – with an increase of joy and an open hand. I know that’s what generosity brings – *great grace upon us all.*

Last week I heard a black father and his son interviewed on NPR. The father told his son that his father had explained to him that babies are born with their fists closed tight because that's where they hold all their talents and gifts. This gentle dad told his son, "As you grow your hands learn to unfold because you're learning to release your gifts to the world. For the rest of your life, son, I want to see you live with your hands unfolded."^{viii}

I thought that was really beautiful –truth that we can all carry, not just in our hands, but in our hearts.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ M. Craig Barnes, from a sermon "Why Give?" preached at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, November 4, 2007

ⁱⁱ Luke 11:40.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr. from a sermon "The Man Who Was a Fool" delivered at Central Methodist Church, March 6, 1961

^{iv} ibid

^v idid

^{vi} Luke 11:22,31

^{vii} Luke 6:38

^{viii} "A Black Father Answers Tough Questions From His Son" Story Corp, NPR, June 9, 2020