

Money and Stuff

Fasting on Shopping and Spending

Feasting on the Free Economy and Service

Rich Fool - Luke 12:13-21

Whole40 is our Lenten program of self-directed curiosity. Each week, we look at one aspect of our lives and the ways that daily habits creep in and make a life of love and faith more difficult. Week one was about food. This week has been about time. This coming week we shift our focus to our relationship to money and things. I wonder if the Scripture has any wisdom about our relationship to money and things? Did Jesus ever say anything about money and things? Let's read from Luke's gospel in chapter 12.

¹³Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But [Jesus] said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And [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." ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'²⁰ 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?' ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

We live in the most blindingly rich, most possession-abundant culture the world has ever known. We are dizzyingly, deliriously, oppressively surrounded by--held captive by--stuff.

One of the damning failures of the Christian church in the United States is our complicity with slavery and racism. But it may be, in the end, that it is just as damning that we Christians have never taken seriously the teachings of Jesus that warn us that having too much stuff keeps us from the good life.

If you look at what the Bible teaches about money and things, most of us--even me, who has read this stuff hundreds of times--is shocked at how plain the Scriptures are that money and things are fundamentally spiritual and fundamentally dangerous. The Scriptures don't want us to have more than we need when others have less than they need; the Scriptures don't want people in debt to one another; the Scriptures tell us not to hoard wealth and by all means never to love it. There may be no "social issue" about which the witness of the Bible is clearer.

And yet here we are: Christians have sat back while love of wealth has become the true religion of our nation. Consumption--over-consumption--consumption that knows no bounds--"it's just part of capitalism," we say. Another way of saying this is that we've consented that our own spiritual sickness is essential to a "healthy economy." Wealth inequality has calcified into a social given. Whole communities, like Decatur, are oases of abundance. And in whole communities, just miles away, people live paycheck to paycheck,

schools “fail,” and poverty grinds people down to the nerve endings. We give to charity. We cling to the idea that people can work their way out of poverty if they want to, so the system must be “fair.” Meanwhile, we scroll on Amazon, one-clicking another “essential” to be delivered to our home; we do so unaware--by design, unaware--how every purchase feeds a system in which the human beings who make, ship, pack and deliver those products and the earth itself from which those products are derived, are sacrifices made to our true God: private profit.

Honest conversations about money and stuff can get depressing quickly. But only if you don't believe there's any other way. We're a church with Good News for the world. The Bible offers another way. Jesus offers a different way. There is a way of living on this earth in which we detach from a love of things, let go of what we don't need, and invest our energy, our desire, our passion in something better. That something better is other people. The something better is just and equitable human relationships.

It's all there for us in Scripture. It's all here in this story from Luke's gospel. As we look at our own relationship to money and stuff, let's look at this story.

A guy approaches Jesus and he's got a problem. “Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” The brothers probably live together in a larger family unit. The lack of sharing the inheritance is creating friction between the brothers.

Jesus says “who set me as a judge over you? I'm not here to arbitrate this claim.” He's wants to do something more important. Jesus first issues a warning: “Be on guard against all kinds of greed; your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The man only asked Jesus to divide the family money. Jesus re-directs to what is at the heart of every financial question: what is the emotional relationship to money itself?

Jesus tells a story. Always a story. A parable. Remember, parables are stories to provoke. They have ambiguous features. They draw us inside the story to wonder about our own lives. This story begins with a rich man. His land produces more than he can use--how wonderful! So the man decides to build bigger barns to store it all safely. This will give the man security--for “many years” he will be able to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” Oh, security! This man has clearly met with a financial planner. Use only what you need, save the rest. Put it in your 401k, your 403b, real estate, stocks, bonds, diversify. Know your number. Keep building bigger barns, because those bigger barns--those are your security. Imagine yourself--eating, drinking, being merry for many years to come.

I'm not sure if Jesus was on good terms with the financial planning industry. Because in the story he tells, God's response to the man and his barns is, “You damn fool!” The man dies that night. All of his things are left to his heirs to quarrel over.

Jesus finishes his story with this marvelous, mysterious line: “this is how it goes for those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God.” Jesus condemns the

rich, prudent man for two things: 1) he stored up treasures for himself, and 2) he was not “rich toward God.” What did the rich man do wrong?

First, did you notice, as you listened to the story, how many times, as the rich man was contemplating what to do with his abundance, he talked about himself?

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. He thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’¹⁸ 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.’¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”²

As this man is contemplating what to do with his abundance, the only frame of reference is “I,” “me,” and “mine.” He actually says “you” once, but he’s talking about himself in the 3rd person! What a doofus! Where are the other people in his moral universe? Where is his family? Where is his community? Where are the people who help him work the fields, who build the barns? Where are the people around him who are sick, or struggling, or suffering, whose lives would be made better by sharing this abundance? Why is there no other human being in this man’s moral imagination? What kind of evil is it that pushed everyone else out of his head and his heart? Evil’s a strong word, I know. Because all this man wanted was a little *security*. What is the line between security and greed? When does the desire to protect yourself, your family, your future... when does it cross over into something else?

The final thing Jesus says about this man is that he was not “rich in God.” He doesn’t explain what that phrase means. We’re left wonder what is it to be “rich in God?” It seems, given what’s going on in the parable, that Jesus implies that being “rich in God” is something like living in communion with others. That it’s a richness of human connection. A richness of having people around you to give to and receive from. The richness of your life spun together with the lives of others through the stitching of your daily prayers. Richness in God--and I don’t know this, but maybe it’s true--is life in generous solidarity with everyone in your community: your children, your family, your neighbors, and those who are struggling. If you are “rich toward God” you know that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it. If wealth comes to me, it is not mine--it’s God’s, and what else would I do but share it? Rich in God is finding security in the mutual, free, sharing of God’s abundance. I am God’s. We are God’s. Because we are God’s beloveds together, we are always rich.

This could be the moment in the sermon when you think, “*this preacher has wandered so far away from what is actually practical that I can no longer hear him.*” Or maybe your response at this point is, “*I’m so guilty of greed and pursuing my own security that I feel nothing but shame right now and I want to get out of here.*” Or maybe your response is, “*that preacher’s up there wearing his nice bow tie and has a late model minivan sitting out there--let him practice what he preaches.*” Listen, I get it. The vision of human sharing that Jesus teaches is so far away from what we all do, it all feels absurd. Don’t shut down. Let’s just wonder together.

There are people all around us who practice the rejection of greed, and richness in God. You all know people who live well below their means; there are people around us--people here today--who quietly give extravagant gifts of love and resources. I keep meet people--met someone again last week--who invite unhoused neighbors they meet at the fridge into their homes. You may know people who are more radical even than this. One of the great gifts of the Open Door Community is that they used to model this kind of life for us; living simply; no retirement accounts, no health insurance. But tell me a place that was richer in God. This kind of life Jesus describes is not impossible.

I wonder if this community could grow in this way. What if a small group of us decided that our relationship with money and stuff wasn't a private matter? What if a small group shared our credit card and our bank statements? What if we opened our earning and saving and spending decisions to the eyes of a loving community? What if we could find a way to truly support one another, teach each other, model for each other, encourage each other to grow in the ways we relate to money and things? What if this kind of community could push back our incessant fears about security--fears that capitalism creates and stokes--so that we could find the joy and the freedom in the mutual free sharing of God's abundance?

What would it look like if you and I--if we--were rich toward God?

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