

Sermon (Luke 12: 13-21, July 31, 2016):

After reading today's passage, my initial thought was that Jesus sure dodged a bullet. Family disputes, like the one this person in the crowd had asked Jesus to solve, seem to seldom end well for Pastors. About the best you can hope for is to calm things down enough to get people thinking and talking again. Most times, though, by the time you're called upon, that can be one tall order.

One Pastor tells the story of a funeral where family tensions were running so high, that a fist fight broke out in the parlor just before the service. It was an all-out struggle – fists swinging, furniture flying, noses bleeding. The Pastor called the police and a number of family members were led away in handcuffs. Mind you, this was just before a funeral service.

After the funeral of an eccentric Aunt, her family gathered in a lawyer's office to hear the reading of her 'will'. The family used to often joke that the much beloved cat of the now deceased Aunt would end up with most of her estate. Even so, it was more than a little shocking when they discovered that the family joke ended up being no joke at all! Resentment and anger immediately filled the room.

Family spats can be nasty. Sometimes they bring out the worst in us.

The person who came to Jesus in today's story, was having a spat with his brother as to how the family's inheritance should be divided. In the ancient world, the eldest son customarily received two-thirds of an inheritance and the remainder went to the younger son or sons. The events leading up to the moment are unclear, but this son was surely not happy. Maybe he felt the inheritance needed to be divided more equitably or maybe the eldest son was holding back on the 1/3 that rightfully belonged to him...I don't know but I think most of us get just how this works – when money is added to the mix of strained family relationships, the result can be explosive.

Churches, which we sometimes refer to as families, are just as susceptible. Peter Steinke, an expert on the way family systems function, says that, like families, money matters in churches can reveal the true heart of a congregation. In other words, how we emotionally handle

money says something about who we are and what we are about.

Interestingly enough, even without the benefit of modern studies on group dynamics, Jesus seemed to understand the significant role money plays in our personal lives and in our life together. Even then, Jesus found it necessary to talk about money and wealth more than any other single topic including nearly 1/3 of his parables. Clearly, Jesus was convinced that our attitude towards money cannot be segregated from the health and well-being of our faith and how that faith is lived out in our families and communities, including the church.

Jesus' response is an interesting one. First, he begs out of getting involved in this person's family dispute with his brother. Second Jesus attempts to turn the conversation towards a more generalized discussion on the dangers of wealth. And as Jesus reframes this conversation, he moves both this man and the crowd overhearing him to a more introspective place, encouraging all of them to consider their own attitudes towards money and how it might contribute to the volatile stresses that money seems to have a habit of causing. In other words, we might not be able to change the other but we can change ourselves.

So, in a very skilled fashion, as only Jesus can do, Jesus introduces this man to a parable that hits close to home.

Now, the interesting thing about a parable like this is that I don't think Jesus was using it as a means to accuse and threaten this man. This was not, in my mind, a God-is-going-to-get-you moment. No, I think this parable was meant to encourage this man, the crowd around him, and us to consider just how dangerous our resources can become when we allow them to own us instead of the other way around.

As Jesus turns the tables on this man and the crowd, trying to move them from blaming the other to being more honest with themselves, I am left in a place where I must turn inward and be honest with myself. How do I function (that is earn a living, raise a family, and live responsibly) in a society that often values people in terms of what they possess and where the accumulation of wealth is often the quickest access to power? How does one distinguish worth apart from what one earns and/or accumulates? How does one overcome the fear of scarcity and learn to be more trusting

of the God who assures us there will be enough? How does one find a place of financial contentment in a society constantly strategizing new ways to trigger discontent in us so that we will spend more? At tables where the term 'It's just business' takes precedence over discussions of what is just, how do we be faithful to the Holy One who gave his all, even his life, so that we might live? In an economy that makes growth the hallmark of success, how do we curb our insatiable appetite so that it better matches a creation that has significant limits on what it is able to produce?

Accepting Jesus' challenge to be introspective I share with you some of my own personal struggles. Trying to live and raise a family on a Pastor's salary has never been easy for me. Feelings of guilt for not being able to provide for my children in ways that others do have been my constant companion. Feelings of failure coming not only as a result of my place on the economic scale but also as a clergy person of the church which seems to find itself more and more on the fringes of societal influence, is a tough feeling to shake. Fear induced anxiety birthed from a sense of financial insecurity has taken its toll on me over the years. Trying to stay true to my calling, not just because I'm a Pastor but because I am a follower of the Christ and a human being, is a never ending battle as I seek to value the person behind the transaction, to be disciplined in the giving of my own resources and gifts even when it means doing without, to hold true to the conviction that budgets are ethical documents, and to constantly bear witness to these things even when it goes against the grain of popular thinking.

Having said that, I also get the whole barn analogy Jesus uses in this parable. It is a stark example of what fear can illicit from us when it gets the best of us.

The comedian George Carlin once said that houses are just places for us to store our stuff. The more stuff we have the bigger the house needs to be. Without stuff, houses would be obsolete.

He makes a point and I am no less guilty of it. My basement is filled with stuff accumulated over the years including paper copies of every sermon I've ever written, as if someone, someday would actually think

them to be some kind of rare treasure!

My dresser drawers and home office are piled high with stuff that I keep, just in case.

My work bench is littered with all kinds of pipe fittings and other bits and pieces of hardware I've saved over the years, again just in case.

When I first started out in ministry, I was militantly committed to making sure my desk was cleared each night before I left my office. As time went on, that discipline seemed to get harder and harder to maintain. Now I find solace in the often quoted phrase, 'A clean desk is a sign of a sick mind.' Stuff. It can really feel suffocating!

Perhaps part of the reason this parable makes us cringe so is because we cannot ignore the truth it conveys.

In every way, the man in this parable has just experienced success beyond his wildest dreams. The growth of his business has been phenomenal, he has outpaced every market analysis there is, and he is a shining spot on Wall Street as broker after broker wishes they had foreseen this goldmine.

Rather than being able to see the tremendous opportunity and blessing his success affords him, however, the owner of this farm views his abundance as a problem.

"What will I do with all this stuff?" He asks. "How can I make this shining moment last? How can I preserve it so I can finally realize that good life I've always dreamed of?"

There is no word of thanks to the God whose good creation has made this moment possible. There is no evidence of gratitude in the way he uses this gift of grace as a gift of grace for others.

The solution to his great dilemma is to build bigger barns...to throw away perfectly good and sufficient barns, in the hope of finding some sense of false security.

Have you ever seen videos of the crash tests they do on cars where they slam perfectly good cars being driven by perfectly good dummies (no not me) into perfectly good cement slabs? What happens next to this successful farmer is a little like that. Out of the blue, God stops this guy in his tracks.

‘What good is all this going to do you?’ God asks him. ‘For tonight, this very night, you will be leaving this earthly dwelling place and you know what they say, hearses don’t come with roof racks!’

Well, there is no mention in this parable about how the farmer in this story reacts but, I’m guessing, the man and the crowd that has been listening in, felt a chill go up their spines. You see, unlike the man in this parable, those who were listening still had time to change not unlike Ebenezer Scrooge who awoke to discover that he still had time to reform his ways and live life to its fullest after his sweat inducing encounters with the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future!

Okay maybe, just between you and me because I know you can keep a secret, I really am a little like that crash test dummy. Maybe I do need a parable like this to wake me up not once but over and over again. Maybe, as hard as it is to be slapped in the face by a story like this, it’s something I need to help me realize there’s still time to get it through my thick head that what I really need is not a bigger barn but a bigger heart and a bigger faith in the One who promises to love me until the end of the age. Maybe there really is an ‘Economics for Dummies’ book for people like me and it’s author is none other than the One, who invites us to this table saying, ‘Come, all of you, share, eat, and be merry for there is plenty to go around for everyone.’

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

***People: And also with you.***

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, so often we are amazed by the incisive way the parables of your son hit us. That is no less true as we enter this time of communion with you and each other in the shadow of today's parable. In this small space of conversation, thought, and introspection, we offer you our deepest gratitude for the gifts you have provided us over the years. We thank you for the means by which you have enabled us to enjoy life, provide for those whom we love, and invest ourselves in the future hope we have for those who will follow us. We give you thanks for the ways in which you have cared for us even when life felt precarious and on the edge. We give you thanks for memories we can cling to, reminding us of the ways you have come to our rescue in the past and the promise that you will do so again.

We also admit, O God, our precarious relationship with money, things, and stuff. The line separating them from being tools we can use to bless and false idols that we worship is thin and, more often than we care to admit, we cross it. Have mercy on us, O God, and never cease in your efforts to break through our resistance to wake us up to second chances. The perils we face are many in an environment that would have us live each day in fear and scarcity. The perils we face are many as we find ourselves easily convinced to hold back and not live the generosity we have seen in and through you. The perils we face are many as we too often allow our possessions to possess us. We cannot overcome these perils alone, O God, and so we seek a faith that is strong and courageous so that we might love you and each other as you have loved us.

There are so many around us, O Lord, in need of your care. We think of those who are hungry, homeless, and afraid. We think of those who are ill and/or have loved ones who are ill yet do not have access to health care. We think of those places where poverty is so severe and opportunities for escape so few, that people resort to violence. We pray for the insight and awareness that we and the gifts we have can make a

significant difference. We pray also for those who are suffering, depressed, wounded, frail, and broken. We especially hold before you these prayers we are now so bold to mention in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

***All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***

***Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.***