

People over possessions

Luke 12: 13-21

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

August 18, 2019

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

A few weeks ago, a number youth from our church took a day off from going to the pool, watching Netflix, babysitting and walking dogs to serve at a place called SOME, or So Others Might Eat, in DC. SOME is an amazing organization that not only serves breakfast and lunch to 500 to 1,000 people a day, they also provide medical, dental and mental health services, job training, clothing, a place to shower and so much more, not just for those experiencing homelessness but for anyone who walks through their doors.

Remembering the people we served and working on the sermon about this man in the parable (sometimes called “the rich fool”) was a sharp contrast. I cannot imagine the fragility, the uncertainty of not knowing where a meal or a shower or a ride to work will come from.

The needs of the people we were with were so elementary, so in-body, so incarnate. They needed to fill their bellies, they needed to wash their clothes, they needed to quench their thirst, and they needed someone to acknowledge their presence.

In a sermon in Chicago, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr said:

It’s all right to talk about heaven. I talk about it because I believe firmly in immortality. But you’ve got to talk about the earth. It’s all right to talk about long white robes over yonder, but I want a suit and some shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about the streets flowing with milk and honey in heaven, but I want some food to eat down here¹.

Food to eat, shoes to wear. Yes one’s life does not consist of an abundance of possessions, as Jesus says, and also possessions are something that many of us take for granted.

This parable is a familiar story, there’s not much cultural translation needed to make this parable resonate for us. In fact, it’s a great parable for a relatively comfortable crowd. Jesus reminds us we really only have two things in life: our body and our time, How will we use them to live now?

Jesus is talking about priorities. Where do our hearts lie when it comes to the things that we amass? Who is God in our lives? How will we invest our lives and the gifts God has given to us?

¹ MLK, Jr. *Strength to Love*. Delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, on 27 August 1967.

He's asking us: How will our lives be aligned? Toward ourselves and our passing desires? Or toward God and our neighbor, toward God's mission to bless and redeem the world? The answers to these questions, consciously or unconsciously, guide our attitudes, choices and actions. If we align ourselves with God, then we live out the divine characteristics such as forgiveness, justice, mercy and love that mark our God.

Whenever I go to the gym I see the same man sitting outside the parking garage. He may be experiencing homelessness, job loss or mental illness. He always greets everyone with a smile and a wave, and often asks for money to get a cup of coffee or bottle of water. The easy thing for me is to mumble something about not having any cash or simply look down as I walk so he won't engage with me.

About a month ago, I decided to do something simple: to look him in the eyes. To grant him the respect of eye contact and a greeting, to recognize that he is a child of God. This costs me literally nothing. Yet helps me to feel closer to God than in many other moments of my day.

Whenever he asks for money to buy a cup of coffee, if I have the cash, I give it to him. I am fortunate to be in a place where five dollars won't make or break my week. But for him, it may not only buy a cup of coffee, but an afternoon in the air conditioning sipping that coffee instead of being outside in the 90 degree heat.

Now we greet each other each time he's there when I pass by, with fist bump (his preferred mode of greeting) and a check in

I say this not to pat myself on the back, but to remind myself of the abundance that I have, and therefore, the responsibility I also have to not let that abundance become isolating.

I think that was the real problem with the rich fool. Over and over again, he says "I, I, I." It's pretty clear from the inner dialogue Jesus describes that this man is only concerned with himself, that he's only looking out for number 1.

Commentator Brendan Byrne writes that the problem in this parable is not so much with the possession of riches but with the desire to acquire and enhance them, to the point that that desire prevents people from attending to relationship with God that brings the only security that counts².

I would add to that that another problem is when the desire for things prevents us from attending to relationship with each other. Our desire for comfort, safety and ease can keep us from attending to God's children who need our attention the most.

² Byrne, Brendan. *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2000; p. 115.

After serving lunch at SOME, our group went to get some lunch ourselves. While we were eating I asked what everyone's highlight was. The one who spoke first said, "definitely the hat."

One of the gentlemen he had served coffee and milk to gave one of the students a new Washington Nationals hat. Luke said he felt bad taking the hat, but the man insisted, and he said if he had another he would have given one to another boy as well. We talked about how, by being able to give Luke a gift, the man was probably able to feel pride and dignity in sharing what he had with others. In accepting the gift, Luke gave a gift back to this man.

In parables Jesus often shows us who God is by describing a person, and then telling us that God is even a thousand times more loving, gracious, merciful than that person. This unnamed man showed us God by living out the parable.

We ate our lunch at a taco place, where the long table had napkin holders with different quotes.

I noticed that one of them had a quote from Anne Frank: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Jesus asks us- what are you waiting for?

Our lives and possessions are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. We rebel against this truth because we want to be in charge of our lives and our stuff. And we are in charge of our stuff, but maybe not in the way we might think.

We are in charge of how we want to steward, how we want to distribute, how we want to show care and compassion with our resources: our lives and our possessions. Those things must keep us *connected* with the world, not isolated from it.

In this day and age it's almost impossible to become isolated, but we can become numb. Numb to the pain that we see every day on our streets and in the news. Tragedy becomes routine, just like the tweets of thoughts and prayers and support sent out by those who are unwilling to engage the terrors of gun violence and white supremacy that plague our nation.

Jesus reminds us to take care, to be on guard. If our lives are being demanded of us what does that mean for our words, for our actions? If we remember that all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, we can take heart in the knowledge that our future is secure beyond all measure. And we can have strength for the journey ahead.

May it be so.