

Waiting Until Tomorrow: The Parable of the Rich Fool

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

A few weeks ago, we heard the story of the Good Samaritan, which begins with Jesus reminding us of the Great Commandment: We are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Both of our readings this morning are about this commandment, but from a different perspective than the one presented by The Good Samaritan story. Both remind us that when we say that we need to love God and neighbor, we need to demonstrate that love by giving both our time and our financial resources, and that we should not wait until tomorrow to do this. We need to give abundantly now.

In the story Jesus tells, a farmer happens to produce far more crops than he had expected, so he tears down his storage barns and builds bigger ones to keep it all. Some of us are farmers, so I imagine we can immediately relate to parts of this story. For those of us who aren't farmers, we can imagine that, at the end of the year, we end up with a lot more money than we had expected. Maybe we economized better than planned, we got an unexpected raise, or maybe we just got some financial windfall. In any case, at the end of the year, we have a lot more money than we had expected to have. Now, in our culture, what would we do with those crops or that money? Would we try to sell the crops? Would we store them, if we could? Or would we give them away to the poor? What would we do with the money? Put in a savings account, a CD or our 401K? Would we buy stock, maybe? Or would we spend it on something we've been waiting to buy? Or would we give it away?

Both Jesus' parable and the story from Proverbs tell us that, as disciples of Christ, we should give away the excess to those in need. The book of Proverbs tells us, "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it

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is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, “Go and come again; tomorrow I will give it,” when you have it with you.” And Jesus seems to explain that one of the reasons why we should share so generously is because we have no idea what will come tomorrow. If we store up treasures for ourselves, all of that work and energy spent to store up those treasures will be wasted and we might die with all that wealth unused.

This parable defies our culture’s wisdom about good finances and even good stewardship. Isn’t it wise to set aside money and goods in case of calamity? Some scholars respond to this cognitive dissonance by examining the metaphorical level of this parable. If Jesus is not talking about money or commodities, but about how we give ourselves to God, then the story is a little more palatable. Let’s explore that idea for the moment. If the rich man in the story is rich in time and talent, if he has a life full of energy, a strong body, or a strong mind and he metaphorically stores them up, what would that look like? Maybe it would mean that, after he was done with a normal work day, he could have devoted his time, talents, and body to a mission of his church or another worthy non-profit, or to serving or advocating for those in need. He could have spent some of that time in prayer, in worship, or in study of scripture in order to learn more about God and who God was calling him to be. But, instead of doing any those things, he spent his time resting, playing in some way, or just hanging out. I think that we could say, as Jesus does at the end of the parable, that he had stored his treasures up for himself, instead of being rich toward God.

This is a legitimate interpretation of the parable and it can invite us to pause and consider if we are in any danger of falling into the rich fool’s error. Recognizing that everyone needs a break and that scripture itself on multiple times tells us to take a Sabbath rest, do we ever go beyond that Sabbath rest and store up more relaxation than we need? Or do we spend our time, talent,

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bodies, minds and spirits in endeavors that don't advance God's Kin-dom when we could be spending our efforts for God?

However, even though this metaphorical interpretation is an important one, it can co-exist with the more literal interpretation, which seems to be about how we spend our money and resources; it's about the importance of generosity. In other words, both the literal and metaphorical meanings of this story can be true. If that's the case, then how do we reconcile the seeming meaning of this story with what our culture teaches us about financial security? Should we save our money and resources for tomorrow or should we use them immediately for what we believe to be God's work?

Moreover, it seems to ask us if we demonstrate that we love God and our neighbor through the way we use our resources? How much is a reasonable amount to set aside for our own future and how much is reasonable to give to neighbors in need? In this parable, as in many others, it seems that Jesus' message is counter-cultural: If we have extra resources at the end of the year—more than we can hold in our real or metaphorical small barn—it sounds like we should share it.

Considering the current economic situation in our country, this might seem like an entirely moot point or, perhaps, a foolish one to consider. For most of us, this isn't a time of plenty anyway, so how does this parable apply to our lives right now? But the people Jesus was speaking to were not generally wealthy and the economic times for most of them were also extremely hard. Still, Jesus thought it was important to tell a story about generosity—about what it is and what it looks like. I believe that he did so to ask us to consider how we define need and how we define what it means to have enough. How big does the storage barn need to be in order for us to have enough?

As we consider the questions the parable and the book of Proverbs seem to be asking, let us consider one last story. It's one of my favorites that I

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learned from the Lakota peoples. I believe I've shared it with you before, but it bears repeating.

- A long time ago...the Lakota lived far to the north and they had to find a new home because of some seriously bad winters. This is the story of how they came to their new home...
- It was a terrible winter and the people were near starving because they couldn't find anything to hunt
- So they sent their two best hunters to find a deer big enough to feed the group
- The hunters, Left Hand and Sees the Bear, spent weeks traveling, finding nothing, falling into snow pits, almost freezing. They were near exhaustion when, suddenly, a huge deer came bounding across their path. They were able to kill it quickly and then make a sledge to carry it home.
- On the way back, they came across
 - A skinny coyote who said: "I am an old woman and have lived a long life, but it is for my family that I beg a little meat"
 - Left Hand was firm and said: "We cannot help her, we must feed our own relatives"
 - But Sees the Bear said: "We cannot let her family starve. The Great Spirit was kind in giving us this deer. We can share a little." And he cut off a small piece of meat and shared it with her. The coyote thanked him and promised to help him and his people if they were ever in need.
 - Later, they came across a flock of hungry magpies. Again, Left Hand did not want to share the deer, but Sees the Bear noticed how small the magpies were and felt that he could

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share a small amount. Again, the magpies were grateful and promised to warn them with their cries if they were ever in any danger.

- A few days later, the hunters came across an injured wolf who couldn't hunt for himself. He had a wife and babies at home.
 - Sees the Bear said: "We have just enough to share," and gave the wolf some meat. The wolf was grateful and promised to help his people hunt in the future.
 - Left Hand was furious: "What we have left is barely enough to feed our people," he said. "Do not give out any more!"
- But the next day, they came across a fox—"The winter is so hard," said the fox, "that, even though I try to hunt, my feet sink into the snow and I can't catch the rabbits. Can you please spare some food?" Again, Sees the Bear gave him some meat.
- In anger, Left Hand decided to leave so that he could tell his people what Sees the Bear was doing, leaving Sees the Bear to struggle alone with the deer. That night, Sees the Bear gave more meat away to a wounded hawk. In thanks, the hawk told him where the hunting was better.
- But the carcass was still so big that it was difficult for him to carry it by himself, so he put it in a tree and returned to village
- When he returned, Left Hand had angrily told villagers what had happened. When Sees the Bear arrived, he told his part of the story
 - After listening, the villagers signed and said: "Some meat is better than nothing and there is enough to go around for a

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short period of time.” They did not punish Sees the Bear, but were proud that he had lived up to his people’s values.

- When they followed him to the tree where he had left the deer, they found that, miraculously, there was enough to feed them all. Moreover, with the help from all of the animals that Sees the Bear had supported, they were able to move to a new hunting ground, where they thrived.

The story causes us to ask again: How much is enough? How much money, resources, time and talent do we really need? Is the small storage barn we have enough so that, in times of plenty, we can share the extra with others? Do we, perhaps, not even need a barn, but just a tree to hold a deer that will last a few days? And in hard times, can we re-imagine what “enough” means so that we can share what we have with our neighbors, trusting that, as a world community, we will get through the hard times together? Is the “wisdom” of our culture perhaps not the same thing as God’s wisdom?

Jesus’ call to us to love God and neighbors is a call to live generously right now. And we can live generously because we can trust that God will continue to grant us lives of thriving and abundance, either through the fruits of our own labor or through the love and kindness of our community. As the book of Proverbs tells us:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge God,
and God will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord and turn away from evil.
It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.

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Honor the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine. Amen.