

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 7.31.16

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Luke 12:13-21

I'm wealthier than I ever meant to be.

I never figured I'd be a homeowner—to the degree that I ever figured much about my future. (I'm not so great a planner.) As it turns out, owning a home is a good way to build wealth. (This is why black Americans being denied mortgages decades ago still has damaging effect to this day.)

I never figured I'd get married—that I'd ever find someone willing and able to put up with me. (I'm a lot to take.) As it turns out, getting and staying married is a good way to build wealth. (And marrying a physician makes this all the more the case.)

I never imagined earning a salary—and the day I stopped going into debt in graduate school and started earning a salary amounted to a sea change to me. It was more than a little disorienting.

Time was my personal banking amounted to me calling that “800- number” for the digitized voice to tell me how much was in my savings account, or how much *wasn't*. What I learned from that weekly phone call determined whether I'd go to the movies that weekend.

Time was I paid cash for everything—car, rent, everything; and I could do my own taxes.

Time was my rent of \$210 a month was a stretch, but a good value I could see. (This was in Cambridge, after all.)

Let's just say my mortgage payment is quite a bit higher than that (not to mention my Tesla payment), and my house is quite a bit bigger than the modest space I used to need.

Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones.”

The man in Jesus' story who struck upon this as a solution—a solution to the problem of having more than he could currently store up—wasn't a crook. There's no evidence, no mention even, that the gains this man enjoyed were ill gotten. Apparently, he was neither wicked nor deceptive: he didn't grow bumper crops because of some agricultural chicanery or overwork of farmhands. There really was nothing wrong with him—but that he was a fool.

Actually, his folly was in the extreme, which Jesus might have gone with for comic effect. I mean, really, this man that Jesus made up talked to himself as people sometimes joke

in telling a story: “So I said to myself, ‘Self...’” Always good for a laugh: “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul...’”

Funny, right? But also pathetic in that it seems the only person this man has to talk to is himself. What’s more, the only thing he has to talk about seems to be his belongings. He mentions himself eleven times before God finally interrupts him. “And he thought to himself [again: comic effect? I mean, to whom else can you think but yourself?] 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 no: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Of course, Jesus offered this parable—this unusually simple and clear (and, I think, *funny*) parable—in response to a real-world situation, which, if less simple and less clear, is perhaps no less funny, involving as it does a fool who is just as laughable. Speaking up from the crowd, he perhaps hollers forth his one concern: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!”

It’s worth saying that this was a silly request. I mean, Torah clearly spells out how the matter of inheritance is to be handled. It specifies the way to divide wealth among survivors of a deceased relative, the proper line of inheritance, and several prohibitions as to who must not inherit and how wealth is not to be distributed. And, yes, though Jesus has by his very presence called into question much of what was legal custom in his day, it’s a reach to assume he’d do so on such a personal level, for example in arbitration between a pair of bickering brothers. Hence Jesus’ response: “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” As one scholar summed it, though we might try to get God to take sides in our conflicts, that “is something God does not do.”

It all makes me wonder if the man amidst the crowd was *trying* to be funny. Imagine all these people following Jesus, many of whom were likely just curious, but some of whom were desperate. In need of healing, in need of restoration, in need of forgiveness or just a fair hearing, such people were flocking to him—and amidst such a sad, needy throng was this man, someone who wanted to join in the hope of the movement but didn’t really have so pressing a

need. So he'd go with the one case he *could* able to make for himself. "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!"

He himself must have known this was all sort funny. But, then again, why not give it a try?

Jesus met this man's unserious attempt with an unserious response—a story that poked fun at the very man who provoked it. Consider, the problem of this parable is a rich man who realizes only too late that his impending death will mean his wealth going to someone other than him, someone who might be really, really unworthy of it; and the reason he told this story is because of a man worried (if only passingly) about the inheritance he means to receive. The story begs the question, maybe your father considered you likewise unworthy? I mean, really, are you as deserving as you think you are?

Be assured, I don't think Jesus meant this confrontation story as deep critique. I think he meant it to tease, to move this man that he might see his own request as the silly thing it was.

As it happens, I like teasing. I like dishing it out; I like taking it. I appreciate it as a mode of communication that's complex, multi-layered, and above all sociable, lightening a mood when things become too serious, or changing the focus or perspective when things come too close to needless conflict.

Different from bullying (and not in degree but in kind), teasing is done in the context and in the service of on-going relationship. It's light-hearted, even affectionate; it's recognizant of the parties involved in the repartee, and respectful of when it will work and when it won't. Indeed, according to psychologist Dacher Keltner, writing for the *New York Times*, "teasing is a mode of play, in which we provoke to negotiate life's ambiguities and conflicts." Really, you can tell skilled and welcome teasing by which, and how many, people it gets laughing.

This is how I like to imagine Jesus in his response to that foolish man. For hadn't the question of the true and enduring value of wealth, indeed the purpose and possible goodness of wealth, long been settled—as long as the book of Ecclesiastes was old?

Five hundred years old, by the time Jesus walked the earth and crossed paths with this man: that's how old this book was at that point. Taken by tradition to have been written by David's son, wise King Solomon, the book, Ecclesiastes, was likely written by some more

anonymous “Teacher.” But it is clearly a book of wisdom, well seated in the wisdom tradition and among the other books of that tradition in the ordering of the Bible (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon).

If wise, though, it was anything but teasing, anything but lighthearted. On the contrary, it’s jaded. “I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom,” the Teacher wrote. “I applied my mind...and saw that all the deeds that are done...are vanity, a chasing after wind.”

As to work, “What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?”

As to pleasure and laughter: “Again, this was a vanity.”

And as to wealth? “I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves...; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks... I... gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

“So, I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem... Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure in all my toil, and this was the reward for all my toil.

“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

The Teacher’s conclusion comes early in the book, and will be reminiscent of something we’ve already heard: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also is from the hand of God; for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”

You know, the Teacher rarely mentions God. That’s one constant criticism of this book: that God hardly factors in at all. But this also means, when the Teacher does mention God, he means it.

I know there are people in this room other than me who’ve accumulated more wealth than they’re comfortable with. I also know there are people in this room — not to mention

countless people beyond the walls of this room — who struggle for the lack of wealth. Certainly, living with too little money to cover your costs is stressful, a danger to health and well-being; and certainly this is to say nothing of poverty that is life-threatening. We all well know that inequalities of income and household wealth are deepening; the gap between those who have more than enough and those who have less than enough is widening. Certainly, too, I imagine everyone here would like to correct those errant trends.

All that said, this sermon is for those who puzzle as to how to do right with what they've got — though all I can tell you is my own approach.

One of the things lacking in a society organized around secular pluralism, as ours is, is a common notion of what is good. This is perhaps a scandalous assertion to those who champion without question or critique secular pluralism. But to critique it isn't to object to it outright. It's only to take the tools secular society has given us and to use them in order better to understand even secular society. If nothing is above careful scrutiny and healthy skepticism, then not even secular pluralism is above careful scrutiny and healthy skepticism.

So...those who might be scandalized by the assertion that a secular pluralist society lacks an understanding of what is good will often assert that you can be "good without God." In fact, maybe you've even seen this slogan on ads and billboards. Paid for by organizations that call into question anything they deem "religion" (a famously difficult thing to define, indeed usually defined to serve the purpose of those doing the defining), they'll proclaim that we can be "good without God."

This presupposes the assumption that people who believe in God think that you can only be good when you have in mind a god who is watching you, judging you, dictating expectations, and taking note of failures.

But this misses the point, falls far short of the point. Truly, the point is much deeper than it's supposed undermining would have us go.

What a god does for a people in relation to their god is not primarily to judge bad from good, but to define this most basic, and also this most slippery, thing: what is good. Yes, for prior to judging good from bad, it needs to be known and established: what is good.

This is otherwise open for question: confusingly, terribly open for question.

What is good?

Well, in the marketplace, what is good is that which will sell, what will make money for the seller, or the corporation, or the stockholders.

In political life, what is good is being of influence; and in partisan politics to judge what is good you need only to compare and contrast the two conventions we've just seen.

In academia, what is good is intelligence, academic achievement, even when it demands you humiliate your peers.

In journalism, what is good is equal hearing from both sides of a story, even when those sides are false equivalents.

In consumer capitalism, in this most widely reigning realm for most people living today, what is good is wealth, that is, money and what we even call "consumer goods." Indeed, having, accumulating, showing off luxury and leisure and conspicuous consumption: this is the "good life."

When the highest values a society holds are rooted in secular pluralism, there's no way to critique such assertions as to what is good—for what is good is up to each and any of us to define, and for the reason that this self-determination is indeed considered a most high good, though it paradoxically leaves us with no way objective way to measure the good. Truly, and often tragically, with no way to take into account cost or unintended consequence or measurable effect of so-called goods, we're bereft of a standard to judge the good of a thing objectively, beyond our own *subjective* evaluation—a situation which is itself considered good though it can lead to terrible outcomes.

The church, though: the church would have none of this. The church has a clear and enduring thought as to what is good: Christ. What is good is that which Christ-like, and what is Christ-like is that which is good.

What is good is that which is self-giving, other-serving, peacemaking by forgiveness-offering, all for the building up the kingdom of God, which is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, which is abundant life for every part and particle of God's beloved creation, and redemption for all that has been and will be and might be and is.

Truly, the standard of measurement for determining what is good is the cross—the means by which God's grace is made known and is poured out so to transform the follies, absurdities, terrors of this world into things that cohere and hold within a redeemed and perfected entirety.

This is pretty heady stuff, I realize. But I think it can apply when it comes to wealth. I think it can come to bear when we decide and discern what to do with whatever wealth we have or might yet have. When you consider that, over the course of history, whenever two peoples have encountered one another, their two options for relating are either to make war or to trade. When each group has something the other group could use, you can bet there will be negotiated peace in the land, you can bet there will be new prosperity rather than destruction. This is the promise and potential of the marketplace, of consumer capitalism if you will: the possibility that we might be able to do well with whatever wealth we have.

The promise and potential of money is that you might spend it on the things that you deem, by Christ, to have enduring value, far-reaching good effect; and the responsibility that comes with gathering wealth is the imperative that you take this promise and potential seriously—from your biggest purchases to your smallest ones.

Other than that, all consideration regarding wealth is just folly, vanity, a chasing after wind. As soon as you catch it—*now* you've got enough—it is already beyond you and you need to resume your chasing.

My poor estate during my twenties was mostly chosen, which means there was privilege even in my “poverty.” But it was still a life within limits, which I appreciated. It helped me prioritize; it helped me order my desire. I mean, why bother desiring those shoes, those CDs, that Blaupunkt car radio? I couldn't afford any of it so why pain myself with wanting it?

Now it's different. Now I can afford such things—which means what used to help me order my desire and deem the value of things is lost to me, and that means I need another means.

Sin, say some in the church, is disordered desire. I like that, I find that helpful, and when it comes to wealth, I find it particularly enlightening. The more wealth you have—either as an individual or collectively in a society—the more chance you have, *we* have, in getting our desire disordered, our evaluation of things warped. The more wealth we have, the more susceptible we are to sin understood thus. Thankfully, no matter how much we have or might someday have, there is always the cross to deem *truly* the worth and worthiness of all things.

Wealth is ours not to have and to keep but ours from which to pour forth one earthly means of grace. Anything else is but a chasing after the wind. And I can tell you from experience, that really is good news.

Thanks be to God.