

The Good Life?
A Sermon on Luke 12:13-21
Proper 13
August 4, 2019

Introduction

There is a lot of division and brokenness in our world. It is hard for people to agree on any things. What seems clear to us is challenged by people who have a different political or cultural perspective. It seems that everybody has their own facts and their own interpretations.

If Disciples of Christ are really a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, how do we bring people together?

Jesus brings Disciples together. We follow Jesus. We look to Jesus for our values.

Jesus doesn't make it easy for us. He never lays down a set of rules. Instead he tells stories. We learn about the kingdom from listening to Jesus' stories.

Today's story is about two different understandings of the good life.

First Move: The Parable and the Frame

There are two parts to today's story: a parable and a frame. The parable is pink in the color coding of the scholars at the Jesus Seminar. They believe that the parable likely was words actually spoken by the historical Jesus. The frame is gray and black, which means these words most likely are not from the historical Jesus.

The frame is about a man who interrupts Jesus while he is preaching about the kingdom. Jesus must be startled. He has been talking about the Good Samaritan and prayer and the inside of the cup, and someone out of the crowd asks, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

The laws of inheritance are part of the Torah, so the man may have thought he was coming to the right place to ask a rabbi to act as judge and interpret the laws of inheritance. Jesus will have none of it.

The law did provide for a division of a man's estate upon his death, but the ideal was for the inheritance to be kept together as a whole. The sons who inherited were supposed to continue in a life together. Psalm 133:1 says, "See, what is so good, what is so pleasant, as when brothers live together?"

Jesus cautions the man to be on guard against covetousness because there is more to life than an abundance of possessions.

The Gospel of Thomas has a simpler version of this story, without the moral at the end. Thomas 72:3 concludes the story with Jesus' turning to the crowd and saying, "I am not a divider, am I?"

Luke uses this story to introduce a parable, to shape how we will hear the parable.

The Parable has many names: the Parable of the Rich Man with the Barns, the Parable of the Rich Fool. My New Testament professor Brandon Scott calls it How to Mismanage a Miracle. Martin Luther King entitled a sermon on this text, *Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool*.

Jesus describes the man in the parable as a certain rich man. He doesn't have a name, just some rich man. He had a field. The Greek word for field can also be translated as region or district. It may mean simply a field; it could also mean a whole region of fields.

The field bore good crops. It could also be translated as the field produced well. This suggests that it was God's action that caused the field to produce.

The man has an interior monologue; these monologues are characteristic of Luke. The man ponders to himself, "What will I do?" He perceives his good fortune as a problem. "I have no place to gather my crops." That is not true. He already has barns [barns is plural], but he believes they are not big enough.

He resolves to tear down the perfectly good barns and build newer, bigger ones. He has to have something newer and bigger. He will gather not only his grain in the new barns but also all his good things.

The man congratulates himself for having many good things that can be stored for many years. His working days are over. Now he can rest, eat, drink, and be glad.

God responds to the rich man. We don't see that often, an immediate response by God. God calls the man a fool. The Greek word for fool can also be translated as someone without good sense. God's response has echoes of Psalm 14:1: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'"

The rich man will probably protest that he has always believed in God, but he manages his life as if there is no God. Ten times in three verses he says: I, me or mine. That is narcissism. Love of self. He does not give thanks to God. He does not recognize his blessings.

One who stores for himself reminds us of the manna that God provided for Israel in the wilderness. The man relies on self instead of God.

God says, “On this very night they are demanding your soul from you.” This is probably the divine passive, this time in the plural. The rich man thought he was secure for many years, but God brings home the fragility of life and the urgency of responding to the call to the kingdom.

The crops and the good things will do the rich man no good when the eschatological moment arrives. Someone else will get his good things.

The parable concludes with a moral, which is probably from the evangelist and not from the historical Jesus, “This is the way of the one who stores for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Luke leaves us there. He does not explain what it means to be rich toward God., though the rest of his gospel gives some examples.

Second Move: Where Do We Get Our Values?

What did the rich man do wrong? Being rich is not a sin. Abraham was a rich man. Zaccheus is a rich man.

Isn't he describing the good life? To be free from worry and be able to enjoy life?

The problem is where the rich man got his values from. He has no thought of God, who is the sources of his blessings. His focus is himself to the exclusion of the community. He is like the man in the crowd who does not want to live in community with his brother. He wants to divide instead of share. He comes to Jesus to manipulate him to do his bidding.

Today's text challenges the cultural values of covetousness and self-reliance.

Rene Girard, a French scholar of world literature who has written extensively on scapegoating, says that the Hebrew word for covet simply means desire. The commandment against coveting is a prohibition against uncommon desire, perverse desire that hardens into sin.

Girard argues that covetousness is the root of all sin. Wanting what our neighbor has leads to violence. Our hands are grasping instead of open.

Self-reliance is a good thing if we keep it in check. There is nothing wrong with trying to meet your basic needs. It is human instinct to meet our basic needs, to survive and to thrive.

Girard says that once our basic needs are met, we still have desire. We don't know what to do with our desire. We need values to guide and control our desire.

Today we are all rich, by first century standards. We have an abundance of things, what today's text calls the good things. Good things have a cost. They cost a lot of your time to earn the money or generate the wealth to buy them. Is that the

good life? Working all the time instead of spending time on things that matter. The gospel writers would say that the things that matter are the things of God.

Third Move: Being Rich Toward God

Luke suggests in other parts of his gospel what it means to be rich toward God. Being rich toward God means sharing your resources and helping your neighbor in need, as the Good Samaritan did (10:25-37). Being rich toward God means focusing on Jesus' word, as Mary did when she was sitting at the feet of Jesus (10:28-32). Being rich toward God means prayerfully trusting that God will provide for our needs (11:1-13, 12:22-31). Being rich toward God means selling possessions and giving alms to get treasure in heaven (12:32-34).

We don't have to take a vow of poverty. Being rich toward God is about living more with less. Being free of debt and possessions allows us to be more generous. There is money left over at the end of the month to give to a good cause whose values you admire. There is more time during the week to do things that matter: spending time with your family, spending time in the community, spending time in stillness with God.

Being rich toward God means trusting that there is goodness in the world that draws us beyond ourselves. Alfred North Whitehead, the founder of process theology, believed that God was the source of creative possibility. Each decision that we make is a response to the past influences in our lives, as well as God's creative influence. Whitehead calls God's creative influence an initial aim. God fashions a unique initial aim for each moment of becoming, each decision that we make. That initial aim is tailored to meet us where we are, the next step that we can make toward the kingdom of God.

Whitehead believes that the core of God's creative possibilities is a set of five ideals: Truth, Beauty, Adventure, Art, and Peace. The divine aim is a harmony that balances these ideals and tailors them to the context of each actual event or occasion of becoming.

Truth is the conformity of appearance to reality. Recognizing things as they really are. Recognizing injustice and shining a light on it. Things like community discussions where people are made aware of how police treat people of color differently.

Beauty is a perfection of harmony, when we perfectly realize God's initial aim for us. It is when our vision as a church matches God's vision for us.

Adventure is the search for new perfections. It gives intensity to life and avoids the triviality of rote repetition. It is when we get out of our comfort zone and try next things.

Art is similar to Beauty. It is enduring individuality that contrasts brilliantly with its background, as when an artist captures a moment that takes our breath away and fills us with awe and wonder.

Peace is the harmony of harmonies that calms the destructive influences in society. Peace is non-violence as a way of life. It reflects the nature of God, who always reaches out to us through persuasion rather than coercion.

We never reach these ideals. They are like the horizon—we can only approach them.

This is the good life, opening ourselves up to the creative possibilities that God calls us to. The things of God lie beyond us, but God only asks us at each moment what we are capable of doing at that moment. As we make it a practice to respond to God's influence instead of to the other past influences in our lives, God can do more with us. God can do more with Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. They conform their will with the will of God. As they progress on their faith journey, many of their past influences are influences from God. It becomes easier for them to do the things of God.

God doesn't give up on anybody. God still calls to the staunchest white nationalist, hoping that he will respond to an initial aim that has been tailored to meet him where he is. These are the lost, and God rejoices when they are found.

Conclusion

The rich man tried to reduce the good life to a barn full of good things. He was a fool. He didn't realize that the good things can't be stored in a barn.

As Disciples of Christ, we look to Christ to lead us to the kingdom. Christ calls each of us and stands beside us each step of the way. The kingdom cannot be reduced to a set of laws. It is a creative mix of the five ideals: Trust, Beauty, Adventure, Art and Peace. It is the good life that waits for us, if only we say Yes.