

Gonna Need a Bigger Barn

A Sermon by Rev. Katherine Schofield | July 31, 2022

When is it ever enough? In the 1890s, when John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in the world, someone asked him how much money was enough. He replied, "Just a little bit more." With this mentality of "just a little bit more," will there ever be "enough"?

In our story for today we have Jesus, teaching the crowd, a crowd of thousands, so many people they were trampling each other. This is Jesus' big teaching moment. And he's got a lot to say, but then, he's interrupted. He's interrupted by someone who says "tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Seriously? Jesus is teaching about caring for others, about living faithfully in a time of danger, he's just cast out demons, told the story of the Good Samaritan and he's about to offer up some of my favorite advice... consider the lillies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin... So, Jesus is pretty busy.

And someone interrupts him, looking for him to settle a dispute over money. Is this really why God became incarnate on the earth, to settle an inheritance dispute? In fact, there were clear laws in the land about how sons were to divide their father's inheritance. Jesus has important things to get done and time is running short. If I were Jesus I think this might have been the moment where I'd really lose my temper. Or, actually, if this were me on my very best day, maybe I would try to set up a mediation between the brothers. But Jesus doesn't do either of these things. While he may be angry he doesn't dismiss the man from the crowd, nor does he solve the man's problem. Instead he uses this interruption as a teachable moment.

He tells the story of the rich fool. Now the rich fool's problem isn't that he's rich, it's that he's greedy, and really, at the root of his greed is fear and a grasping after elusive happiness. He has made a good crop, better than any year previous. He has more than he needs, but rather than seeing his surplus as a blessing (possibly even a blessing to be shared) he sees his

surplus as another challenge. Maybe as he was sewing his wheat he thought, if only I get a good harvest I'll be happy. But now that he's got his plentiful harvest he's telling himself, if only I can build a bigger barn to store this all, I'll be happy. He says: 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." I, I, Mine, mine, Me, ME, ME. But we know that won't be the end of the story. The next year he'll either have a smaller crop that won't fill his barn and he'll be unhappy, or he'll have an even bigger crop and then he'll have to build a new barn all over again. God knows it too, and this is why God calls the man a fool. The word "Fool" occurs only one other place Luke (11:40), with reference to the Pharisees; there too foolishness is associated with greed and with the neglect of justice and the love of God.

At times we too are foolish. Our reality is that no matter how much we have, we are always aware of things we don't have. We are bombarded by marketing wizards whose job it is to convince us of all the products we need to complete our lives. And so we never quite feel that we have enough. Look - there is no number of iced shaken espressos that will bring you lasting joy, and no number of social media followers will make you more beautiful or blessed in God's eyes. You cannot buy your way into God's grace.

Can our wealth secure a relative degree of comfort? Certainly. Can it grant to us confidence that we are worthy of love and honor? Certainly not. Can it help us be in right relationship with God and neighbor? Nope - In fact sometimes it can even get in the way. We can become consumed by consumerism and miss the bigger picture of what's really important, of the ways we can help others and build up a hopeful community together. We need Jesus to interrupt us - with this story, and hold up a mirror to our foolish ways.

Jesus concludes that this is how it always is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. The two notions, storing up treasure and being rich toward God, are verbal forms with the same roots as the noun “treasure” and adjective “rich.” In other words, it isn’t a question of something we happen to have or a characteristic among many. We actively choose to do one thing or the other, to be rich with barns or rich with God. It is the path of fear - which seeks to store up treasures in the hopes of gaining comfort or security or even immortality - vs. the path of faith - which puts trust in God, and in the community. It is this path of faith that makes the impossible possible - like the multiplying of the loaves and fishes, or the sharing of a meal that has been passed down through millennia.

Only as we recognize that the gifts of ultimate worth, dignity, meaning, and relationship are just that – gifts offered freely by God – can we hope to place our relative wealth in perspective and be generous with it toward others.

And so how do we choose to be rich with God? We look outward, rather than just at the things in our own hands. We fight against our media driven impulses to consume more and more - more plastic, more fuel, more junk - knowing that when consumerism consumes us it also harms our planet and health of the whole ecosystem. And we put trust in God to grow and multiply our blessings as they are shared with others. At Old South Church we are incredibly blessed with resources - and so God calls us to share them, and we do to make possible the work of incredible organizations like the City Mission Society, and Healthcare without Walls.

So, I hope you will go out into the world this week and think a bit more about how you can practice being rich with God. But I want you to know too that, even if you get it wrong, as wrong as the rich fool or the interrupting brother, God will still bless you with riches that cannot be taken away, of dignity, and beauty, forgiveness and grace. Those gifts are yours, no strings attached, freely given in love.