

August 3, 2025
Proper 13, Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
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Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalms 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

In the Name of the One, Holy, and Living God. Amen.

Today, we are confronted with two things which my grandmother said should never be discussed in public: money and religion. But there they are, both of them, in the last three words of the Gospel: “rich toward God.” What does *that* mean? What does it mean to be “rich toward God?”

It might be easier to see what it is not. Some of you may remember George Carlin’s paraphrase on this lesson. He says, in part:

“That’s all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That’s all your house is - a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody’s got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn’t want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff...All they want is the shiny stuff.

“That’s what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff! Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.”¹ Thus George Carlin on the gospel of Luke – and the Teacher in Ecclesiastes.

We are a stuffy people, are we not? 11% of households in the United States rent a storage unit for stuff that won’t fit into their basements, attics, or garages. The self-storage industry in this country has a massive footprint, with 78 square miles of storage space – more than three times the size of Manhattan. That’s a lot of old skis and grandma’s furniture.

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¹ George Carlin, *A Place for my Stuff*, 1981.

The reading begins with a rift within a family. One brother is asking Jesus to intervene in a family squabble about an inheritance. This is the same theme of divided inheritance that we will hear in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the Judaism of Jesus' day, division of inherited property was allowed, but fell short of the ideal of the mutual responsibility required to maintain and steward the health of an extended family.

This brother, like the Prodigal, sought to acquire his "personal" wealth for himself, freeing him from societal obligations – in this case, to his family. Jesus, true to form in Luke's gospel, refuses to be drawn into the brothers' drama. Instead, he says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

According to my friends who know such things, the last part of this saying is difficult to translate. So, here's a stab at paraphrasing... "It's not just that life is more than possessions, it's that an abundance of possessions cannot really place you in control of your life."² Then Jesus tells a story of a man so enraptured with his good fortune that he ends up all alone.

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The parable begins with a conversation in which the rich man is talking *with* himself, *about* himself...and *only* himself.

And the rich man 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.'

There seems to be no one else in this rich man's world. Jesus sees, and would have us see, an isolated, insecure soul who has forgotten human connection, forgotten God's generosity and provision (*the land of a rich man produced abundantly*), forgotten that possession and stewardship are very different things.

He also seems to have forgotten that, in the face of death, we are all naked paupers. As Paul reminded Timothy, *for we brought nothing into the world, it is certain that we can take nothing out of it* (1 Tim 6:7).

In the New Testament, "abundance" implies community. An abundance, a surplus, is not about "enough, and then some" for me, but about a sufficient amount to share. This is the vocabulary used in the stories of miraculous feedings, when the leftovers/surplus/abundance are gathered up to share later.

² Andrew McGowan, *A Greedy (and Lonely) Fool*, July 29. <https://abmcg.substack.com/>

The rich fool thinks that the abundance that the land produced requires a new infrastructure...for himself. Having drawn up plans for bigger barns for his own use, the rich man tells his soul to relax, eat, drink, be merry, as if no one else existed. How surprised must he have been when God pulled the plug on his plans for life of ease and comfort! Foolish, indeed!

The opposite of isolation is community. So, perhaps this parable is not so much about wealth, or greed, or even about finances, but is, instead, a parable about community. It is within community that we find sustenance and comfort and help and hope. It is within and through community that we experience life within God. Remember that Jesus taught us to pray, "give us this day our daily bread."

Let's be clear. Community is not easy. Community means putting up with people who disagree with you or annoy you or hurt you. The hard, hard work of forgiveness, trust, and compromise is vital within a healthy community. But God did not create us to be alone. The farmer who was filthy rich in stuff but dirt poor in relationships never got that message. Have we?

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Around the world today, loud and anxious voices shout at us that we should not and cannot trust each other, that the world is growing more and more dangerous and, therefore, we must be increasingly fearful. The examples of outrage from yesterday's news have already been replaced by new ones this morning. Government officials and online influencers alike encourage us to construct all manner of self-protective infrastructure – from actual walls to distorted physical attributes of hair color, BMI and muscles which will separate us from and, somehow, protect us from "them" – our neighbors.

They are all beating the same drums of fear – and it feels counterintuitive, even impossible, not to be afraid. But fear paralyses us. Fear will not lead us forward. FDR was preaching gospel in his first inaugural address (March 4, 1933) when he uttered that famous line, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

The most frequent biblical injunction is "be not afraid." This is not the same as "don't worry, be happy." It is not about boosting our individual courage. It is to remind us to turn to one another with our fears as well as our hopes and dreams and needs in order to form community. The Bible warns us against fear because it's really hard to care for your neighbor and create community when you are afraid.

So, how do we avoid isolation, the fate of the rich farmer? How do we avoid forgetting that God blesses us so that we may be a blessing to others? How do we avoid

forgetting that all of our blessings – health, wealth, achievement, etc., – are always gifts from God, intended to be shared, in gratitude, with others?

In today's first lesson, the Teacher reminds us that everything we accumulate must be left to those who come after us -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? The great allure of wealth, and its accumulation, is a false sense of self-sufficiency and security. It's all vanity, it's all passing, like the grass of the field. You really can't take it with you. But you can do something with it while you're here.

From Genesis on, the biblical witness reminds us that we are created to be in relationship. So, we can be rich toward God by seeking out the company of others, learning how to be open to their needs. To paraphrase Martin Luther, "God needs neither our good works nor our wealth, but our neighbor does."

How can you be rich toward God? There's no one answer that fits everyone. God has gifted us in different ways and calls each of us to share our time and talent and treasure in ways that are unique, but all of which serve the common good. To pray, "give us this day our daily bread," and to forget (or refuse!) to share it when the prayer is answered is blasphemy.³

When you hear the invitation to be rich toward God, don't be afraid. Be brave and wrestle with *what* this invitation means for you, at this time, and within this community. If you accept your gifts and your giftedness as gifts from God; and if, in a season of abundance, your plans for an expanded infrastructure include your neighbors; and if you toil with wisdom and knowledge and skill on behalf of the building up of community, that toil will never be like the wind, or the grass of the field, and it will never be in vain. And God will not say, "you fool!" to you. The richness we spend on God in this way is the only richness that we will keep in the end. Amen.

³ Dutch theologian Albert van den Heuvel, in *Edge*, an American Lutheran Youth publication of 1967, p. 29.