

“Thanks Giving, Giving Thanks” a stewardship sermon November 19, 2006
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Test: Luke 12:13-21 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 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 God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

IN TODAY’S GOSPEL, a man comes to Jesus and asked him to settle a family dispute about a contested will. It was typical that inheritance be divided 2/3 to an older brother, 1/3 to a younger brother – obviously the younger brother wanted intervention! But Jesus was not to be drawn into a family squabble. Instead, he offers a parable about a man who had an unbroken run of prosperity. In today’s language, he had successfully played the commodities market. So prosperous did he become that his barns could not hold all of his crops. His solution was to tear down these barns and build bigger and better barns. Then, with his financial security in hand, he could sit back and truly enjoy life. His philosophy was: eat, drink, and be merry. Until of course, he died.

I suspect this rich man would have identified with the famous Jack Benny skit, where the comedian is walking down the street and meets an armed robber, "Your money or your life!" There is a long pause. Jack does nothing. The robber impatiently queried, "Well?" Jack replied, "Don't rush me, I'm thinking it over."

This rich man could well have fathered the little girl who, whose Sunday school teacher asked the class to draw a picture showing what they'd do if they could spend the day with Jesus. After a few minutes, this little girl asked, "How do you spell Bloomingdales?"

This rich man is the very one John D. Rockefeller had in mind when he was asked "How much wealth does it take to satisfy a person?" He replied, "Just a little bit more."

According to common wisdom, we are not supposed to like this man. The usual interpretation of the parable concerns the folly of a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth. The underlying assumption is that there is something wrong - cynical, if not sinful - about eating, drinking, and being merry in the face of death's certainty.

But are any of you slightly uncomfortable with this interpretation? I mean, does it actually square with our experience? Most of us do not find working, and the accumulation of those things which come as a result of our endeavors, to be an evil. In fact, our experience often finds that money has the ability to bring blessings to ourselves and others.

In fact, I think this usual interpretation actually flies in the face of Jesus' own tradition. His spirituality was one which emphasized celebration and feasting. While attending the wedding reception at Cana, he saw to it that there was plenty of good wine for everyone - 180 gallons by John's count!! Later, he was carried away when feeding the multitudes by the sea; and, after everyone had eaten their fill, there was enough food left over to fill 12 baskets. Many of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God draw on his own experience at dinner parties. And let it never be forgotten that his critics found sufficient justification in his lifestyle to accuse him of being a "glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34)." Jesus enjoyed eating, drinking and being merry.

I think the real message lies in the fact that God did not say the businessman was evil. God said he was a fool. Jesus did not condemn the man for enjoying life, nor even for being rich. He condemned him for not seeing beyond his own success, his own comfort. He left God out of his equation. In his prosperity parade, he was alone. In the reviewing stand: his goods, his fruits, his barns. God? Not the first thought. There are 61 words in his recitation of abundance; 12 of them are the first person singular. In four short verses the rich man used the word "I" and "my" ten times. He did not see others as the source of his bounty, or even God, only himself. God was in his life, but he didn't know it. God was in his fruits, God was in his fields, God was in his goods. God was everywhere except in his gratitude.

Further, he left other people out of this equation. When his harvest has been so great that it exceeded storage facilities, all he can think to do is to build more barns! But in not sharing his abundance, he denied others the right to comfort and security. In not looking beyond his own stomach and arrogance, he became a bottleneck in the flow of Shalom, in the distribution of blessings to others. His sin was not that he ate, drank and was merry, but that he was withholding the means for others to do the same. The rich man was foolish because he himself was the ultimate loser. He died without knowing a relationship with God and with his fellow beings. He died without knowing the awesome exultation of praising and thanking God, and without experiencing the profound satisfaction and grace of sharing with others.

This parable condemns the shortsightedness of failing to be a good custodian of the abundance that God entrusts to us. And it points out how money is not evil in itself: money can be a blessing or a curse depending upon whether it is our servant or our master, our tool or our tyrant, a means or an end. It reminds us that money cannot buy happiness.

Here is a modern day parable of sorts. One day the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people live. He wanted his son to appreciate and acknowledge his own wealth. They spent a couple of days and nights on a rural and rundown farm. There was much hard work and little food or comfort. On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"

"It was great, Dad."

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh yeah."

"So, what did you learn?"

The son answered: "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night.

"Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight.

We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father was speechless.

"Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."

The Gospel parable reminds us that like the rich man, we do indeed have much. Material welfare is a blessing from God and can bring Shalom into our lives. But the rich man forgot his perspective. He forgot Paul's admonition to clothe himself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; to forgive and embrace his neighbors; to put on love, which binds him with all others together in perfect unity as members of one body, called to peace. Above all, he forgot to be thankful.

According to author Gregg Easterbrook, we are in "abundance denial," a tendency to be blind to our own prosperity. He claims that our abundance of choices creates stress, and our fixation on material goods leaves us searching for some deeper meaning in life. His final theory about our discontentment revolves around a lack of gratitude. Numerous studies show that a sense of gratitude results in feelings of well-being and optimism. Cultivating a sense of gratitude may be the key to finding contentment in our lives and proper use of our money.

Today, we are being asked to share with our church. For some of you, visitors in particular, this is a simple invitation to a gift for today. Others are being asked for a pledge for 2007, a pledge of funds and of time. And we are asking for a commitment to some kind of participation in the upcoming capital campaign. To the outsider Stewardship Sunday might look like just another fund-raising activity in a money-dominated culture -- payment for services rendered. It may look that way to the outsider, but that is not what it is at all. We are deliberate in calling this an offering -- not dues or obligations or a collection. We are deliberate in acknowledging that when it comes to God's love and God's promises, there is no scarcity. There is only abundance. And so we are called to do what seems absurd to the rest of our world. We give our money away -- freely, generously, joyfully. We give it away because we love our church, we value this faith community, and we believe that in giving, we genuinely receive. We give it away because we honor and thank a power higher, greater, more loving and giving than ourselves. We give it away because we trust that Power to take care of us. We give it away in the form of time, talent and treasure, not because we have to but because we want to.

Giving is not about church budgets, building programs, or stewardship campaigns. It's about love. It's about gratitude. It's about abundance.

Acknowledgment of God's abundance always elicits the response of thanksgiving. Gratitude is the conscious, rational choice to focus on life's blessings rather than on its shortcomings. Thanksgiving is an act that lives out the measure of our gratitude. It is a compulsion to do thanks. To give thanks. Give things. Give thoughts. Give love. Gratitude itself becomes the gift, creating a cycle of giving and receiving, an endless waterfall, filling up and spilling over.

This act comes not from a feeling of obligation, like a child's obligatory thank-you notes to grandmas and aunts and uncles after receiving presents. Rather, it is a spontaneous charitableness, the simple passing on of the gift.

Extravagant gratitude, when lived out in acts of thanksgiving, makes God's extravagant love real, alive, grounded in complete faith and trust, bursting forth in abundance. May this be true for you.