

Oct 16th, 2016 (#1 in Parable Series)

More or Less? (Luke 12:13-21)

We begin today our series of sermons where we look at Jesus' parables, and we begin with The Parable of the Rich Fool. Jesus liked to teach through using parables – stories. Jesus knew that a good story could reach people from all cultural, social and intellectual backgrounds – everyone loves a good story.

A poor homeless woman once walked down a residential street, looking for someone to share some food, perhaps a little warmth by the fire, or maybe even a bed. She knocked on one house, but was turned away. At another, the door was closed in her face, and the same at another and the next. And so, she sat huddled under a small tree at the end of the street. Soon, a fellow traveler came to the same street. The homeless woman said to the traveler: "You'll have no luck here; no-one wants to listen. You may as well go somewhere else." But the other traveler assured her that he was always invited in. So ignoring her words, he went on up to the door of the first house. The woman watched from under the tree. And she saw, to her amazement, that sure enough the traveler was invited in; she drew closer and she listened to the laughter from inside the house, and then after some time passed, she saw the traveler came out of the house with a warm blanket wrapped around him and holding a hot mug of soup. Angrily, the woman went up to the traveler and demanded, "Why did they let you in and not me? What is so different about you?" The traveler looked at her said, "Come with me, and I promise that you will be let in, when you are with me." And so, together they went to the next home where indeed they were invited in, and asked to eat and stay the night. And the name of the woman? Her name was Truth, and the name of the traveler was Story.

Jesus knew that sometimes the truth would only be accepted with a story. That is why, when he was asked to settle an inheritance dispute between a poor man and his brother in verse 13, Jesus did not act as Judge or Arbiter, instead, he told them a story. It is through Jesus' telling of the story, that his listeners, including us, catch a glimpse into the rich man's thinking. The man was not an evil or a bad guy. His plans would have been in line with the ancient recommendations to farmers to maximize their productive land area; so it would be seemingly wise for him to tear down the old barns to build new more spacious and efficient barns. In a larger barn he could store the grain for a number of years, perhaps get a better price for it one day, and maybe have a surplus of funds so that he could:

"Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." (v19)

I mean, honestly, what is so bad about that? Are we not also encouraged to plan for our futures? We live in a society of pension plans and RSP's. I remember when our son was born, we were given a welcome package in the hospital. Along with diapers and information about our new little baby, there was a signup sheet to start saving for our new born to go to University! But planning for the future is not bad – it is when it gets out of hand and leads to greed, that is when it becomes a problem. Jesus points out in verse 15:

"Watch out, be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

That is the kernel of truth in Jesus' story today. Greed and covetousness. It is OK to plan for the future. That was typical in Jesus' time, and it is typical for us today. It is typical of a whole social system. But it is not alright when we have enough and we just want more and more. We live in a society where the media constantly bombards us with consumer materialism; images that tell us we 'really need' countless products – things that we honestly have no use for! Just this last week, our 15-year-old son was trying to convince me that he 'really needed' a T-Shirt that he'd seen advertised on one of his favorite web pages. All the other T-Shirts in his drawer were insignificant – he must have this one!

But he's not alone! We are all encouraged to max out our credit cards; get mortgages that might push our financial limits; make use of that special low % deal to buy that new car. Our society treats it as the norm to want more, bigger and better. We do not live in a society that encourages equality of ownership, or fair distribution of wealth. If we did, then we would not have 795 million people in the world suffering from chronic undernourishment, or 80% of the world population living on under \$10 a day. Statistics from Oxfam tell us that the annual income of the richest 100 people in the world would be enough to end global poverty four times over.

"Watch out, be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

In Jesus' story, the rich man's thoughts are dramatically interrupted by God in verse 20. *"God said to him 'you Fool!"* In the original Greek, the wording is actually "Aphron" – meaning someone who is without reflection or belief. We hear it used in Psalm 14: *"The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God."*

The rich man in Jesus' story is a fool because his own life is about to end, and all his goods and possessions will then pass into the hands of others. The things that he had regarded as 'his' will no longer be 'his', and the illusion of ownership will be shattered. I am reminded of the Cree First Nation saying about ownership:

No -one owns the land. It is the land that owns you. It feeds you and clothes you, and allows you to run free until the comes to take you back again.

The stories and proverbs of our Indigenous people, and the history of their traditional way of life, can teach us a lot about sharing possessions; before the Europeans arrived, they lived with an understanding that all their goodness in this life was to be shared among them, for they believed that it was not in this life that they received riches, but in the next.

The comment that Jesus finishes his story with in verse 21 underlines the truth in the story.

"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself, but is not rich toward God"

It points to the contrast between 'storing up treasures' for ourselves, as the rich man did, and being "rich toward God." What exactly does that phrase mean to us today – "Rich toward God". It could be interpreted that we are rich not because of the wealth that we store up in our barns or bank accounts, but rich because of the many blessings that God pours out on us. We all know that we can all 'count our blessings'. But I think the conclusion to Jesus' story is also referring to acts of generosity that we express

to others. When we share the good things that we have with others, it is the same as giving to God. In Proverbs 19, verse 17, it says:

“He who is kind to the poor, lends to the Lord, and God will reward him for what he has done.”

The Parable of the Rich Fool is a powerful story that Jesus tells. And it is all the more powerful because it is not a tirade about wickedness, or a political manifesto about the redistribution of wealth. It is not a barrage of true statistics of alarming poverty rates. What Jesus tactfully does, is prick the bubble of our self-satisfied sense of ownership. He reminds us of the injustice of wealth.

And more importantly, I think that The Parable of the Rich Fool is a powerful story because something striking happens to the central character in the story – a typical rich man. And what is that something? God spoke to him!

Perhaps, God is speaking to you today.