

August 1, 2010

Scripture: Luke 12: 13-21

Sermon: "The Parable of the Rich Fool"

I'm not sure whether to thank the author of Luke for this story or to have a stern conversation with him for including it. He gives the preacher an uneasy task, to talk about money, the need for it, and the supposed security of it. He gives the preacher an uncomfortable task: talking about the elephant in the room, Money and the Gospel. It is a combination that just doesn't seem to fit. We know because Jesus said that you can serve two masters: wealth and God. Luke gives the preacher the difficult task of talking about money especially in these uncertain economic times.

And the more I thought of this task this week, I came to realize that maybe that's why Luke gives the preacher this difficult and uncomfortable task. Maybe that's why Luke wants communities of faith to address the white elephant in the room. Because the conversation about money and the Gospel has been a constant and a troubling thing for people of faith from the beginning of time, not just here, Midway in the year 2010.

I think Luke would agree with us that for us to do God's work here on earth, we need money. And it would be foolish or even hypocritical to act like we don't need money for the work of God's Kingdom. There are projects and missions to support. There are clothing banks, food pantries, Habitat homes, storm clean up, homeless shelters just to name a few that all need money to do their mission and their ministries. We know, just like Luke knew, just like Paul knew when he was founding churches in the ancient world, just like Jesus knew when he sent his disciples out, that it takes money to help spread the Gospel message. The early disciples and Paul relied on the wealthy to support their missions. The disciples and Paul relied on the generosity of the community to fund their new churches and ministries. Just as it takes money for us to operate as Midway Christian Church, today and tomorrow, and the next week, and the next year, and for years to come. It takes money...

So why this parable? If Luke acknowledges that it takes money to operate and be the church, why does he include a parable that seems to say just the exact opposite? The peculiar thing is that Luke is the only Gospel to include this particular story. Sure, it is there in the other Gospels in some shape or form through verses, verses that say where you store your treasure there your heart is also. But Luke is the only one to tell this particular story in all its glory, in its entirety. Luke is the only one to tell this particular parable that seems to point its finger at us and makes us uncomfortable.

So why include it? Why couldn't Luke just skip over this part? Why not simply leave out this part and just add the few verses like the other Gospels? Because Luke wants to remind us that the Gospel isn't always easy. Because Luke wants to remind us that that the Gospel message doesn't always make us comfortable. Because sometimes being a disciple is not always comfortable or easy or profitable.

Luke figures it is better to talk about it, get it all out in the open, and to really open ourselves up to what God is saying to us.

So let's take Luke's example and get it all out in the open... Why does this parable make us so uncomfortable? Why do we squirm a little when we read this parable? Because we see ourselves in the man. We have had the same thoughts. We have all said to ourselves I need more storage room. We can see ourselves in this man that Jesus calls the rich fool and it is not the most comfortable place to be...

And I think it makes us a little more uncomfortable now simply because of the economic mess that we all find ourselves in. This particular parable makes us squirm because one of the lessons that we have heard from a young age and seems to be hitting home especially now is that we are to save for a rainy day. And in our minds, we see that is what the man did. So why include this parable if it goes against sound economic judgment and business sense? Once again, not the most comfortable place to be...

So, Let us take a fresh look at this parable and for us to do that we have to set aside our assumptions, our being uncomfortable with talking about money, and let's tackle this taboo that is Money, security, saving and the Gospel.

First thing, we have to realize that this man is not portrayed as wicked or evil. We are not told that he takes advantage of his workers, pays them low wages, runs sweat shops or overlooks hazardous working conditions. He's a farmer who has experienced a bountiful harvest and now he is trying to figure out where to store it all. so he tears down his barns and built bigger ones. Nothing earth shattering there. And that is when we realize that Jesus doesn't say anything about it being evil to save or to prepare for the future in this parable.

In fact, I bet Jesus is counting on his audience that day to know that there are examples throughout the Biblical narrative that share how the wise save for a rainy day. When he is telling this parable, they probably remembered stories of Joseph when he was in Egypt and how he helped care for the people of God because he encouraged the Pharaoh to save some grain during good harvest years for those lean years. They probably could recite the verses in the book of Proverbs that say it is smart to make provisions for the future.

Just as they would probably remember that there are also warnings throughout the Biblical narrative that remind them that it is just as foolish to think that they are secure because they have these provisions. There are narratives, proverbs, parables that act as warnings throughout the Biblical story that also remind people that they live in a temporary world, that their things fade with time, that their possessions can be destroyed or break down over time, that banking systems can crumble. And the only thing that they can truly trust and find security in is in God and God's promises.

That is why Luke shares this parable, as a reminder and a caution for them and us as disciples on where we put our trust. Our trust should be in the Lord, not our possessions. So for Luke, the man in our parable is called foolish not "because he makes provisions for the future. He is foolish because he believes that by his wealth he can secure his future." He leaves God out of the equation. He trusts his possessions to provide him security rather than trusting in the promises of God. He was living what he would claim as a blessed life. He was living the good life. And in the end, when death comes, the man has nothing to show for it. He has a barn full of grain

but no relationship with God. Lots of possessions but no community. Lots of wealth but no real connection with others.

This parable stands as a word of caution for us as disciples to rethink what we would call a blessed life. Even in Luke's time, people of faith thought and equated a blessed life with the good life. If you had lots of stuff, then you must be doing okay and must be really a good person. Things bring your satisfaction. Things bring you joy. Things bring you wholeness. And Luke is reminding his church and us through this parable that life does not consist of an abundance of possessions. Life consists of relationships with God and with our brothers and sisters. Luke is reclaiming the ideal of a blessed life as a life not full of possessions, but a life full of God, secure in God's promises, trusting that God is with us. Luke is reclaiming the ideal of a blessed life as a life where we experience the Kingdom of God through our relationships with all of God's children.

And he does this in a very unassuming way, through the conversation that the man has in the parable. For you see, the man is carrying on a one way conversation with himself. It is all about his needs. It is all about his wants. It is all about saving for himself. "There is no thought to using the abundance to help others, no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, no recognition of God at all." It is all about me, myself and I. It is all about the man's wants, the man's supposed needs, the man's supposed secure future.

There is no community. There is no God. There are no relationships. There is no Kingdom of God for this man. And for Luke, that is not a blessed life. For Luke, that is an empty life. For Luke, that is unfulfilled life.

"This parable undercuts our habit of equating possessions with the "good and blessed life." This parable serves as a reminder that we wake up every day in need, regardless of how much money we have in the bank, regardless of how many possessions we have, regardless of how big our house is. Each morning, we wake up in need. And these needs can only be met by God. Sure the man had an abundant harvest, but God sent the rain to water his fields. God send the sun to warm and nourish the plants. God brought forth the life that sprang from the seed.

This parable is a word of caution for us as disciples, a reminder that as we journey along our lives, we must always remember that God supplies our needs and there is nothing that we can do that will secure our future or give us true control over our lives. "We are fragile beings." We are temporary beings. We have lives that are full of uncertainties and insecurities and our possessions, our barns full of grain, don't secure our future. Only God can secure our future. Only God's promises can give us security. Only God's word can give us enjoyment and significance to our lives. That's is what it means to live a blessed and a good life is when we realize that God is in control, not our possessions, that God's word satisfies our hungry hearts, not more stuff, that God's promises give us hope and strength so that we can enjoy life and live it to its fullest, not our wealth.

The Good News is that We live a blessed and secure life as disciples, as believers, as people of faith because we are rich towards God, Because we understand that life is not made up of possessions and temporary things, because we know that we rest secure in God. The Good News

is that we live a blessed life grounded in the promises of God. The Good News is that we are blessed, not by our possessions or our barns full of grain. We are blessed because we have opened our hearts and our minds and our whole souls to God and our lives have been filled with joy, with hope, and with love.

May we always live the good life, secure in the promises of God, secure in God's word, secure in God's love for us. Amen.