

“In Community with Others”

Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, August 4, 2013

Old Testament Lesson – Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 18  
New Testament Lesson – Luke 12:13-21

Life is full of abundance – the abundance of family and friends; a wonderful, miraculous abundance where one good friend can mean the world to us. We have an abundance of time, which we feverishly carve out between work, downtime, family obligations, and the fun that we get to have.

Our grocery stores are full of an abundance of food; our shopping malls display rack after rack of products for us to buy or just gaze at it in awe and admiration. We have an abundance of water in this country, compared to places like the hill-country of Jamaica, that Cameron Klim told us about, in last Sunday’s Forum. When it rains in Jamaica, said Cameron, everyone runs out in the downpour dancing and singing, because it’s such a rare and precious gift just to have fresh water, a gift to be freely shared with one another.

And that’s not just in Jamaica. Another of our Forum presenters, sharing about her mission trip to Kenya, East Africa, told how the villagers would wake up to heat water for them over a fire at 4 or 5 a.m., just so the American visitors could bathe in the morning, something the Kenyans themselves would never bother with – hot water to bathe in.

Why is it that people who have so little are often the most generous with what little they have been given? The answer is just that: “the little that they have been given.” They know that everything they have is a gift, and one does not hoard a gift or waste it thoughtlessly.

And yet that’s just what the man in Jesus’ parable does, in today’s New Testament lesson. Jesus tells us about a man whose land has produced an abundance of crops – so many that his barns will not hold them all. So he thinks to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he says, “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.”

Notice the words used by the man to describe his situation: “my crops,” “my barns,” “my grain,” “my goods,” “my soul” – does he not realize that all of this is a gift from God?!? Clearly he does not. So God calls him on it, saying, “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,” says Jesus, “(for) those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

What is it to be rich toward God? The parable doesn’t tell us. But it does tell us what it’s not – what it is like to not be rich toward God – “my, my, my; that’s mine and you can’t have it!”

It's interesting that the original Greek for the words "being demanded" – when God says to the man "your life is being demanded of you" or taken from you – the Greek words for "being demanded" can point to either God demanding or taking the man's life or the man's possessions demanding or taking his life.

Don't we also get consumed by our own possessions; so overwhelmed by all that we have that we can't think straight or find any peace and quiet in our lives? TVs blaring, the car radio always on, so much food in the fridge we just stand there staring, trying to decide what to eat – if we're even really hungry.

Our automobiles have become more of a burden than a blessing as the cost of gasoline and repairs creeps ever higher. And then there's the kids' activities – everyone so loaded down with schoolwork, sports, music lessons, and outside groups! It's coming, you know, just around the corner – another school year.

And yet, all of our possessions and each of these activities are blessings from God, when kept in proper perspective. The problem is the more we have materially the more we lack in proper perspective.

And before you know it, we're stuck. We find ourselves clinging so tightly to our possessions that we lose hold of our souls, and that's when we let God just slip right through our fingers.

A stingy old man who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness was determined to prove wrong the saying, "You can't take it with you." After much thought and consideration, the old moneygrubber finally figured out how to take at least some of his money with him when he died.

He instructed his wife to go to the bank and withdraw enough money to fill two pillow cases. He then directed her to take the bags of money to the attic and leave them directly above his bed. His plan? When he died, he would reach out and grab the bags on his way to heaven.

Several weeks after the funeral, the deceased man's wife was up in the attic cleaning, and she came upon the two forgotten pillow cases stuffed with cash. "Oh, that darned old fool," she exclaimed. "I knew he should have had me put that money in the basement."

Heaven or hell – which direction we go depends on what we hold dearest to us. Just like when we count our blessings we experience heaven on earth, we can also find ourselves going through hell by clinging too tightly to our possessions.

The trick is to know that they're not our possessions in the first place. Anything and everything we have is a gift from God, to be used to God's glory and purpose.

If what you have achieved or accumulated in life has brought you pleasure or earned you any degree of respect or position in the world – as a mother or a father, an aunt or uncle; as an employee or boss, a care-giver or volunteer; as an athlete or student, son or daughter; a homeowner or a good neighbor,

if what you have accumulated or achieved in life has enabled you to give back in anyway, than that's a blessing from God.

If, on the other hand, we take the advantages that life hands us and squander them solely for our own pleasure and advancement, or if we allow ourselves to become jealous of what others have, or if we look with envy on another person's life and let that cloud our vision and dampen our spirit, than we are in a living hell of our own making.

Maybe that's what it is to be rich toward God: holding all that we have – even as little as that might be – as a gift from God to be enjoyed and shared in community with others.

A bishop visited a young priest serving a tribe of Native Americans.... The bishop knew and loved this tribe, and enjoyed their feasting and dancing. At the end of his visit he tried to describe his feelings to the priest. "Always when I leave the village," said the bishop ..., "I try to define what it means to me, why it sends me back to the world refreshed and confident. Always I fail. It is so simple, it is difficult...."

A moment later, the bishop found the words to express what he takes away from being among these simple people of the Native American village. "... For me," said the bishop, "it has always been easier here, where only the fundamentals count, to learn what every man must learn in this world." "And (what is) that, my lord?" asked the priest. "Enough of the meaning of life to be ready to die."

That story is taken from Margaret Craven's book "I Heard the Owl Call My Name,"<sup>1</sup> and it is given to us this day as a gift from God: ... To learn "enough of the meaning of life to be ready to die," to be ready to give up all that we accumulate and all that we cling to in life, knowing that our most important possession is not all our stuff, but our relationship with God, and our generosity and service toward one another. In other words, being truly rich toward God.

As you go through this week, think about how we might better use the possessions and achievements of our lives in service to God. As you go through this week, ask yourself, am I taking in all the blessings and richness of life and living only to myself and to my own enjoyment and my own glory. Am I being rich only toward myself – or am I – are you – being rich toward God.

In other words, do you and do I experience life's blessings and the richness of our lives as true and abundant gifts from God, gifts, to be enjoyed and shared in community with others. Let's take that question with us through this week. Rich toward God, or rich only toward ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), 149-150.

## Pastoral Prayer

Source of all being, we turn to you as did your people in ancient days. They beheld you in the heavens; they felt you in their hearts, they sought you in their lives.

Now their quest is ours. Help us, O God, to see the wonder of being. Give us the courage to search for truth. Teach us the path to a life lived with you.

So shall we, by our lives and our labors, participate in bringing about the great hope inherited from ages past, hope for a world transformed by true freedom, justice and peace.

We pray all this in the name of the one you sent to set us free, Jesus Christ, who taught us to raise our voices and our eyes toward heaven in prayer, as together we sing:

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.