

## **Rich Fools** Luke 12:23-21

There's nothing like moving to discover how much stuff you have. Just having to clear out my office for the new carpeting to go in led me to go through piles of papers that had grown for a while, and sort through other valuable materials I'd accumulated over the years.

That's especially visible to us today. Those of us who've lived here for a while are familiar with what this time of year brings. Almost all of the apartment leases in Ames end July 31 and begin August 1, and so the streets are full of U-Hauls, pick-up trucks, and livestock trailers as people move from one apartment to another. The thrift stores in town are overflowing with donations, and the city is even holding their own rummage rampage sale with donated furniture over at the big parking facility on the other side of Campustown, now in its 6th year. Last year, more than 90,000 pounds of furniture and housewares diverted from the landfill, and more than \$40,000 was raised for local non-profit agencies. If there's any time of year aside from Christmas that shows how much stuff we have in our lives, and how much we value the stuff we have in our lives, this is it.

The problem, though, isn't how much stuff we have. The problem is what that stuff represents. What the stuff means. The problem comes when our stuff becomes more important than the people in our lives. The problem comes when we put our trust in our possessions, in our wealth, in anything other than God. That's what makes us rich fools.

This makes today's Gospel lesson both very timely and very challenging for us. In the so-called Parable of the Rich Fool, we see a man consumed by his possessions. At first glance,

he seems to be a good, industrious worker. He has a profitable year, and decides that he needs new storage space for all of the harvest. That doesn't sound like a bad thing. In fact, it sounds like something that should be encouraged. Yet Jesus calls him a fool.

The problem here isn't just that this man is rich. The problem is his greed, and how it has isolated him. If we look at the pronouns in the monologue of the farmer, we see that it's all about him. My crops. My barns. My grain and goods. My self. The problem with the rich man is not that he was rich. The problem is that he was selfish. Greedy. And alone. No family or friends in this picture to be consulted. No neighbors to help join in raising the new barn, or to rejoice with him at his success. No mention of those who helped gather in this bumper crop. And no mention of God. No sign of gratitude to the One who makes the rain fall and the seeds grow. No thought of wondering how he can use this great harvest for the greater good. Not even a thought of using the riches for a big showy donation to the temple. Just a conversation with himself, about himself.

Luther once described sin as being curved inward. Navel-gazing, belly-gazing. So focused on one's self that no one else was seen. This rich man had that in abundance. He spent all of his time thinking about himself, and not about others. He spent all of his time accumulating wealth, and none in building relationships with others, none in finding others to share in his successes. His greed had consumed him. He was alone. He was, as Charles Dickens described Ebenezer Scrooge, a rich fool cut out of the same mold, "secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster." The rich man's stuff

had isolated him. Instead of building a barn, maybe we should picture him building a money vault like Scrooge McDuck has, large enough to swim in the piles of coins and riches. A rich fool, with eyes only for his wealth and riches.

This rich man, perhaps grown apathetic to the needs of others because of the insulation his wealth provides, has no concern beyond the contentment of his own soul. He has no empathy for others; no sense of the needs of his neighbors; no sense of how his blessing could be a blessing to others; no sense of connection to anyone. In this sense, he is a fool, locked in his own little world and oblivious to the presence, humanity, and need of all others. And so, when judgment comes, he finds that his wealth can't protect him from the wages of sin and death.

Our challenge with this parable is that, even as greed is known as one of the seven deadly sins, it doesn't seem to be discouraged. Instead, it seems to be encouraged. Our common culture wants you to believe you don't have enough. Scarcity is not just a mindset, it's a marketing tool, and one of the modern difficulties with the notion of scarcity is that in a virtual world, our barns have no limits. The cloud has endless capacity. Our electronic bank accounts can hold as many zeros as needed. And there's always a reason for a sale. Did you buy a lot during Amazon Prime Day a few weeks ago? Are you waiting for the tax free day to buy your school supplies and new school outfits? Are you looking ahead to the Labor Day sales, or checking your physical mailbox or your virtual email box for the next round of Christmas sales?

Luther also knew the dangers present in this temptation. Writing in the Large Catechism

about the last two commandments, the ones about coveting, he wrote that "Everyone tries to accumulate as much as he or she can, and lets others look out for themselves. Yet we all consider ourselves upright people, and put up a fine front to conceal our villainy. We hunt for and think up clever tricks and shrewd tactics—better and better ones are being devised daily—under the guise of justice. We brazenly dare to boast of it and defiantly insist that it should not be called rascality but shrewdness and foresight. In this we are abetted by jurists and lawyers who twist and stretch the law to suit their purpose, straining words and using them for pretexts, without regard for equity or for our neighbor's plight. In short, whoever is sharpest and shrewdest in such matters gets most advantage out of the law, for as the saying has it, "The law favors the vigilant." This last commandment, therefore, is not addressed to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright—to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments." Those words were true almost 500 years ago, and are still true today.

Greed causes you to turn a blind eye to others in need. It's so dangerous that John's Gospel describes greed as the reason Judas betrays Jesus, since we're told Judas is the treasurer of the disciples and he used to skim some money out of the moneybag for his personal gain. Greed is so dangerous because it makes us think that we will be content if only we have enough, but we don't realize that we'll never have enough. Greed creates a hole that can never be filled.

That's why Jesus came; to fill the emptiness we try to fill with so many other things that can

only be filled by God. Jesus came not to condemn the rich, but to show us what we can truly depend on. Jesus was the Son of God and Creator of the universe, but he gave all that up to come down and wander the earth as a homeless, itinerant preacher. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Then Jesus journeyed to the cross, where even his clothing was taken away from him, leaving him utterly destitute and completely poor. He died as a criminal between two thieves. But the blood he shed on the cross was more costly than all the gold and silver and jewels in the world. Jesus died to forgive our sins and remove the idols from our hearts. Money could never buy what Jesus freely gives. Yet just because forgiveness is free doesn’t make it cheap. Our salvation cost God the death of his only-begotten Son, the most priceless gift the world has ever seen.

It’s easy for us to put our trust in our riches and resources, in our savings and stuff, to be rich fools. But Jesus promises something more, something that will never let us down. He gives us himself, he gives us forgiveness, he gives us eternal life. Not that we’ve earned it, but because Jesus earned it for us. That’s a promise we can trust.

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