True Abundance
Luke 12:23-21

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 9th year. Last year, almost 133,000 pounds of furniture and housewares diverted from the landfill, and more than $ 62,300 was raised for local non-profit agencies who contributed volunteers. 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.

All of our lessons today point to that truth. As the Gospel lesson opens, we see the occasion for the parable. A man approaches Jesus and says; "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Unlike others who approach Jesus, this man does not ask Jesus to answer a question. He does not ask Jesus to help him discern the God-pleasing way to go about dividing an inheritance. Instead, he simply wants Jesus to enforce how he has already decided it should be. Whether he is relying on custom or established law, the man is trying to box Jesus in. There is an action he wants fulfilled and he is turning to Jesus only in order to bring about that action, that result. The way he looks at the world has changed the way he sees God. God is there to enforce what this man knows needs to be done. God is there to guarantee that this man has the kind of life he desires.

It is interesting, is it not, that when people talk about idolatry, they act as if God is not around. That is, idolatry is seen as replacing God with something else. If money becomes your god, then God disappears. Money alone rules your life. But that is not the way it is. When you have an idol, God does not disappear. He is just demoted. He's not just a copilot as you drive. He's a servant. That's why Paul describes covetousness as idolatry.

When people have idols, God ends up becoming the power they turn to keep their idol going. God is present in their lives but not as Lord of all things. No, God is the one we turn towards to keep our idols going.
For this man, his idol was possessions. He believed that an abundance of possessions would bring fulfillment to his life. But that did not mean this man had no use for Jesus. It simply meant he knew what he wanted Jesus to do. He wanted Jesus to enforce the laws of inheritance in a way that would give him more possessions. Jesus had become a servant to this man's idol and a means to an end of having a life filled with an abundance of possessions.
But Jesus isn't content to leave the man in this web of deception. Jesus instead tells a parable, a story, to get the man who comes demanding for Jesus to give him what he wants to instead see what he really needs.

Into this dark realm of devilish deception, Jesus brings the light of God. He tells a parable. In the parable, we see a picture of an abundant life. It looks good. But looks can be deceiving. In the midst of all this abundance, there is a profound emptiness, a complete lack of knowledge or trust in the one true God. As the man's possessions grow and as the man's confidence in having achieved the purpose of life expands, suddenly, God comes out of the shadows in the figure of death. That night, the man's soul is required of him. That night, God, the giver of life, comes to take it back. All this man thought was life has faded away and, instead, he is confronted with his own emptiness in the presence of the One who has made and given all things.

Through this parable, Jesus invites us to meet God, the God who rules over all things. This God is not the great enforcer of the laws we believe will make our lives happy. This is not a God who exists to be a vending machine, dispensing happiness if we put in enough prayers or promises. No, this God is the Lord of Life, true life, life given as a gift to be enjoyed in this world and into eternity.

Earlier this year, Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson published a book titled, Abundance. In it, they argue the left should not shun "supply side" economics – that making more housing, more roads and runways, more cars, more shoes, – is good for society. In contrast to calls from the left for scarcity, to use less so that there is less climate change and more to share with every one of every minority group, they think that having a goal of abundance for all would be Using examples like that of the attempt to build high speed rail in California, where labor costs, environmental regulations, and local zoning ordinances have combined to make the project unfeasible.

In some ways, we do have a more abundant life than those who came before us did. Those who lived with choking pollution, legal discrimination against women and those of other races, one third (adjusted to real dollars) today's per capita income, no electronics, cars without seat belts, far higher rates of heart disease and cancer, being able to eat fresh fruit in February, would think we have abundant lives. Yet we often see not what we have, but what we lack.

Abundance of possessions isn't a guarantee of happiness. The Global Flourishing Study (GFS), a groundbreaking five-year longitudinal study of over 200,000 adults across 22 countries, has started publishing the results of their research. we find economically developed countries have high average scores for self-rated financial well-being, access to education, and life evaluation. Yet poorer countries have higher scores for positive emotions, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and social connection and relationships.

The researchers in this study wrote, "Some countries with the greatest wealth and longevity may have achieved these goods at the cost of a fulfilling life…. [The data] suggests that, for most people, flourishing is found above all in dense and overlapping networks of loving relationships."

The problem is with the farmer in the parable is his greed, and how it has isolated him. If we look at the pronouns in his monologue, 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. The man who comes demanding of Jesus is the same way, putting possessions over his relationship with his brother, stuff over his sibling.

Sin causes us to be curved inward. God calls us to look outward. God shows us love, shows us who He is, and calls us to look at the world as He does, with love, not greed.

Jesus came so that we could have a truly abundant life. That life does not come with a full barns or bank accounts. It is a greater abundance than any politician could promise or give. It comes with meaning and purpose. It comes with connection. It comes with forgiveness. It comes with the free gifts of God, giving us not always what we want, but always what we need.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa
August 3, 2025