

**Grace Episcopal Church**  
**August 4, 2013**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min**  
**Text: Luke 12: 13-21**

I need to tell you that I am struggling this morning. And it's not because I've just returned from vacation and am not back in the "groove." No, it's because of today's Gospel text.

Huh. So. This guy, the one in this parable that Jesus calls a "fool" was really bad, right? He had an especially successful harvest, far beyond what could be stored in the existing barns. So, he decided to tear down those barns and build bigger ones. This would keep the crops safe from the elements and sustain him for some time to come. He could back off, enjoy the fruits of his labors and, maybe, even retire from his years of farming.

Is there something really wrong with this? It doesn't seem so different, really, from what are taught all of our lives, is it? What has been pounded into our brains? Growth and success are good. Save, save, save for your old age or a rainy day. Don't be a burden on your children; be a prudent money manager to stretch those assets; make plans for the distribution of what is left—wills, living trusts, bequests.....

It is really hard to figure out what the problem is here. What, exactly, is the lesson we are to take away? Jesus talks about guarding against greed. We do live in greedy times—times of injustices and growing gaps between super rich and those at the bottom of the economic scale. We should be outraged. We should do all we can to rectify this. At the same time, many of us have been personally hurt by the greed of others. But our own greed? Many here are trying to live on fixed incomes—or planning for that time that is not so far off. Some of us are working a few extra years beyond what we intended because of economic losses and the probability of living longer than the average statistical life span. So, I think that standing here ranting about greed is a bad idea.

Jesus said, "our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions." I think we know that it is not about the money or possessions per se but, rather, our attitude and connection to them to the exclusion of other things. We do not go around with the bumper sticker that used to be popular: "He who dies with the most toys wins." At least, I hope not.

It is not success that is the problem. God does not dislike those who are successful or rich. We are not all meant to give away everything and go live in monasteries. Throughout our scripture, we have examples of those who are wealthy surrounding Jesus and Paul supporting their ministries. And certainly, adding our burdens to our floundering social safety nets is not wise.

So what, then? In a place like this where we are dealing on an almost daily basis with life situations—not just theory—end of life transitions, declines in health and ability, downsizing, and other difficult passages, pat answers will not do. We need to be talking here about meaning. What really matters to us? What do our possessions mean? How do we best use whatever abundance we have been given?

It's not just what possessions do *for* us. What do possessions do *to* us? Do they make us relaxed and happy and generous? Or do they create fear of not having enough, making us tight-fisted and self-concerned?

The text today does not really give us answers to these kinds of questions. It doesn't tell us the answer to a question that is frequently in my mind, either. How much is enough? How much do I really need to live a reasonably comfortable life? How much should I be giving to others? Do I take care of myself first? Or do I open my fists and give generously, expecting to be enriched in non-material ways?

As you know, I have just now returned from Vail Colorado, surely a place where many have an abundance of riches—second or third homes, the means for expensive vacations and enjoyment of material goods that are far beyond my imagination. As it happened, I came across a business column in the *Vail Daily*, written by a strategic consultant, business and personal coach, and motivational speaker. Using data from 40 years of research from the Zig Ziglar Organization, he listed the eight things that people really want in life: to be happy, to be healthy, to be reasonably prosperous, to have security, true friends, peace, solid family relationships, and hope. A good list. I want these, too, and I imagine all of us do. He recommended writing down these eight things and then marking those that seem to be going well and working to develop those that are less than adequate. He predicts that when all eight are at an acceptable level, you can have everything you enjoy in life—even the material things are likely to fall into place. You can have it all! Setting goals and pursuing dreams are worthy tasks. And the columnist' method is not unlike many of the “formulas” I have tried to follow from women's magazines over the years. Maybe you have, too.

But this sounds a lot like the “Prosperity Gospel.” You do all the right things and riches will come to you. Nowhere is there mention of what happens when the unexpected, uncontrollable things in life occur. Nowhere is there mention of a higher power or a spiritual dimension to what is meaningful in life. Nowhere is there mention of other people or factors fitting into the formula—it seems to be an individual pursuit.

The ways of the world are not like the ways of God's Kingdom. So a difficult text like this does give us food for thought. You see, I think the man Jesus called a fool did not think or reflect on anything other than his material goods. He spoke only of himself and what was

his: “I will build bigger barns, I will store my crops, I will speak to my soul, Soul, relax, eat, and be merry....” His world was an individual one, not one of sharing. It was a world of what he thought of as self-sufficiency. An illusion. And his timing was lousy. He waited too long to think about the meaning of his life and how his goods fit into that. His life came to a sudden end.

Jesus ended his parable with this verse:

<sup>21</sup>“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (NRSV)

What does it mean to be “rich toward God?” Eugene Peterson, in *The Message* says it this way:

<sup>21</sup>“That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.” (THE MESSAGE)

I found some comments on the Internet helpful with this difficult text. One blogger looks at this question from the standpoint not of the individual, but the community. She says (paraphrased from RevAllie),

Richness towards God begins with the notion that we are all woven into one cloth, we all share one humanity. We live in solidarity with all of God’s people. We cannot afford to avert our eyes from human pain or suffering wherever they occur because when we do we look away from God.

Being rich towards God requires recognizing that what we do with what we have matters both here in this community and throughout the world. We are rich towards God when we stop and assess the impact of what we have and what we do with what we have on those standing in the crowd with us—both here in this community and throughout the world—for we all wear the face of God.

Another blogger from Australia sums up what the fool might have asked himself:

What is it that makes life worthwhile? What is it that, when our life is required of us, will leave us at peace rather than raging into the night? In the long nights before that final one, and in lonely days when all we can do is remember and reflect, when there is no going back, what will be the source of peace?

What’s in your barn? Can we talk about it?

Amen.