

RICH TOWARD GOD

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Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, '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.' But God said to him, '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 with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I.

There was an old bumper sticker we used to see on the back of pickup trucks in the 1980's: "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Ironically there are still many people who believe it! Yet the life worth living is not about building up riches—not in this world, and not even in the next one—at least not riches like we usually think of them!

The family—or even the church—with the biggest savings account or investment portfolio is not necessarily the richest toward God. The state with the fullest coffers, or the state that sides with big business and that subsidizes the wealthy is not necessarily abundant toward its people—certainly not all the people.

What makes us rich and what makes us poor? And what does it mean to be rich toward God? In our story from scripture this morning, a common dilemma is thrown at Jesus—two siblings arguing over what is a fair division of their wealth... and possibly a division of the family farm that has been kept together for generations. Although historically we have assumed this story is about two brothers, it is possible that the one raising the issue is a sister—since sisters had little place at the table at all when it came to inheritance!

Jesus makes it clear he is NOT in the business of divvying up family estates. “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” But then he addresses the root causes of their conflict. He issues a broad warning that cuts both ways—but especially takes aim at anyone trying to *hold onto an unfair portion*. “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” He warns against getting too caught up in the desire to accumulate wealth.

Jesus seems to understand that, be we middle class, struggling or wealthy, greed is a powerful force that sneaks up on us and destroys relationships—that the desire for wealth and security and comfort can distract us from more important things, and become the center of our life. He goes on to tell a simple story about a wealthy man who was doing well in agribusiness. Just at the moment he was getting ready to build even more and larger storehouses, just as he was telling his soul, “Self, you’re all set—you can chill now, relax man, eat drink, be merry.”—Just then his life was required of him.

There are those who read the story of the rich fool in the bible, “The Man” who built bigger barns to hold his extraordinary surplus wealth, as a condemnation of all material wealth. We read the reassuring words of that man talking to himself on his last night, and take home the false message that we are never supposed to be happy, always be guilty and driven. But that is not what the gospel says!

Jesus was telling this story to a crowd that included many who had tasted starvation, the sort of women and men who had worked the fields of that man’s farms, but been unable to taste their bounty. So the choices THEY saw for the man were not between materialism and spiritual faith— they knew all too well that without a little food, and a little money, a modicum of material support, people perish. From the perspective of people in the crowd listening to Jesus, the alternatives before the rich man were much more obviously moral. He could either keep it ALL for himself—hoarding in his own warehouses—or he could open his storehouses to his poor neighbors, sharing at least some of the surplus, so someone else could plant and farm. And they *saw* him hoarding.

They saw him failing to recognize his own abundance or share it with others. Because that was what they had seen people do to them all their lives. And they understood that to be rich toward God means sharing our riches, share and share alike, with our neighbors.

II.

On September 18, 1918, having been convicted of sedition for publicly opposing US participation in World War I, Eugene Debs, labor organizer and chronic Socialist presidential candidate, said in a statement to the court: *“I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.”**

These days as in ancient times, the issue of wealth is about how much or what we have. But it is also about attitude, and about focus, about shared investing of our shared resources for the human good. And it is about doing our bit to transform that social order to resemble something like mercy and fairness.

For those of us NOT weighted down with hundreds of millions, it is all about what we are willing to do with what we have, what we are willing to risk, of our wealth and of ourselves. It is about where we are willing to invest our resources, material, spiritual and personal. Are we going to hoard our investments solely in ourselves, or are we going to allow ourselves to become part of some larger cause, dedicated to the kind of world for which God longs and toward which common sense and faith alike point?

The question of bigger barns or better human investment always starts very personally. For those of us who cannot even see how much we have, the challenge is to accurately and honestly own up to what wealth, power and privilege we do possess-- and employ our internal resources and those in the world around us—however tiny or huge-- for the sake of what is truly important: come life or death, hell or high water. Few of us in this room own untold millions, let alone billions. Nonetheless, the question of whether we are in it for ourselves at the expense of others, or we have a deeper vision, rooted in the love of God and committed to community with our neighbors—that remains the vital question.

Where we find our wealth is also a question of faith. In this very congregation, we have many examples of remarkable people who have chosen to share what they have, to put their wealth to good use; people with little of their “own” who have stubbornly have found other resources; and those who continuously lay their lives on the line, risk their own comfort and security for the sake of a greater good. There is more than one remarkable story of abundant living going on at this very moment!

I am mindful of our sister Malinda Myers, today: Malinda who died this past week; Malinda who owned a small house, and never was a person of more than modest means. And yet she measured her wealth by a different standard: her commitment was to her neighbors; her investment was in the pursuit of racial justice.

And her biggest struggle, when it came time to enter a nursing home, was her struggle to define how on earth she might continue in a life of service.

III.

. *“Love is life. All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love. Everything is, everything exists, only because I love. Everything is united by it alone. Love is God, and to die means that I, a particle of love, shall return to the general and eternal source.”* So wrote Leo Tolstoy.

Malinda Myers’ death this past week took me back a few years, to another time, another loss, personally. Three summers ago I had occasion to gather with hundreds of people to remember someone who never had much wealth, and shared freely what he did have. That person was my cousin, Jim Carman. It was a painful honor to be asked to go to Minnesota to conduct a gathering in his memory, held outdoors in a Peace Park in Minneapolis.

The individual who had come the furthest to be with us was a successful Indian economist named Madhu Sen. He had come from India to say thank you, in part for something that happened his first winter in Minnesota, thirty some years ago. A fellow undergraduate named Jim had noticed that Madhu did not own a decent winter coat. “I came to the US over-confident,” said Madhu. I had thought I could get by dressed for winters as we had them in a hill station in India,” said the man. “But this was Minnesota. Knowing that I would likely be sensitive and not want to accept help,” said Sen, “he discreetly left his one down jacket in my room without saying anything. I found it later. It was obviously his best warm winter coat. I wore that coat for four years.”

Sometimes to be set free for building not bigger barns but a better world, to remember Love, can take a close encounter with death—a moment of **recognition** that allows our lives to be opened and made new.... We realize it not in the death of the rich fool, but in the moment when we lose those whom we admire and love—those who have staked their lives on a better way than the bigger barns methodology.

In each of our lives there come crossroads times. It may happen one day or night—or maybe it is many days and a little at a time—but there comes a crossroads. It is the crossroads at which we must recognize what is the abundant harvest of our lives; and decide where our wealth is to be found and where it is to be dedicated.

At the heart of the choice is the question—will we serve ourselves, or will we allow ourselves to become active partners in Christ’s larger vision, dedicating our

resources and our personal gifts toward a bigger more loving picture than the world that we had occupied? Will our lives be a self-contained picture, centered on the comfort of our souls? Or will we be stirred to the holy discomfort that is the symptom of Love at work?

There are some questions no one else can answer for us. They are experienced in the middle of the night, standing alone in the Living Presence, or in some moment in broad daylight, in the midst of an anxious crowd. Sometimes the “Answers” come slowly, sometimes in a flash. It begins with recognition of the holy abundance in our lives: a true wealth that cannot be measured in diamonds or pearls. That is when the choice opens up: we are invited to give up lives lived unto ourselves alone, and embrace lives rich toward humanity, and therewith God. In such moments we find the courage to give away our best jacket, to risk that march down State Street, to face the magistrate, to speak for love, to adopt a radical new investment strategy pointed toward the redemption of our own humanity.

*E. V. Debs, **Statement to the Court Upon Being Convicted of Violating the Sedition Act**

Delivered: September 18, 1918

First Published: 1918. Source: Court Stenographer

Online Version: E.V. Debs Internet Archive, 2001