

Sunday, August 7, 2022

A Generous Community

(Series: “Stories of Jesus” – The Rich Fool)

(Luke 12:13-21)

Luke 12:13-21

The Parable of the Rich Fool

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

¹⁴Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” ¹⁵Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

¹⁶And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

¹⁸“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

²⁰“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

²¹“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

Message:

Earlier this summer, I was able to take some time off and go on family vacation. During this time away from my normal routine I was able to do some different things. One of these different things was reading a few good books.

One of the books I read was the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. Has anyone else here this morning read this book?

The Secret Life of Bees is a story about a 12-year-old white girl named Lily who is living in South Carolina in 1964. Lily’s life has been shaped around a blurred memory of the afternoon her mother was killed and then living life afterward with a physically and verbally abusive father. When Lily’s fierce-hearted black housekeeper and “stand in mother” Rosaleen insults three of the deepest racists in the town in which they all live, Lily decides that its time that both she and Rosaleen spring free from their surroundings and run away. They escape to Tiburon, South Carolina, a town that holds a secret to Lily’s mother’s past. When they arrive, they are taken in by an eccentric trio of black beekeeping sisters, August, June, and May, who introduce Lily to their mesmerizing world of bees and honey.

About halfway through the book (pages 146-147) there is a delightful interchange between August, the oldest of the eccentric sisters and Lily while they are on bee patrol together, checking the hives. While they are walking along in between two of the hives, Lily says this to August...

“There is one thing that I don’t get.”

“What’s that?” replied August.

“How come if your favorite color is blue, you painted your house so pink?”

August laughed. “That was May’s doing. She was with me the day I went to the paint store to pick out the color. I had a nice tan color in mind, but May latched on this sample called Caribbean Pink. She said it made her feel like dancing a Spanish flamenco. I thought, ‘Well this is the tackiest color I’ve ever seen, and we’ll have half the town talking about us, BUT if it can lift May’s heart like that, I guess she ought to live inside it.’”

“All this time...” Lily said, “...I just figured you liked pink.”

August laughed again. “You know, some things don’t matter that much, Lily. Like the color of a house. How big is that in the overall scheme of life? But, lifting a person’s heart—now, *that* matters. The whole problem with people is—”

“They don’t know what matters and what doesn’t.” Lily said, filling in her sentence and feeling proud of herself for doing so.

“I was going to say, the problem is that they know what matters, but they don’t choose it. You know how hard that is, Lily? I love May, but it was still so hard to choose Caribbean Pink. The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.”

“The hardest thing on earth...” August says to Lily, “is choosing what matters.”

After I read that line, after I read what August shared with Lily, I had to stop reading for a moment. I had to put the book down. What August said, for whatever reason, went straight to my heart, that place within us where we determine and make the choices that we do every day.

The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.

Friends, is this not true? Does what August says to Lily ring true with what goes on inside of your heart too?

The hardest thing for us is choosing what matters.

In our text for this week, Jesus tells a parable, a story, that directs our attention to our own hearts. To that place within us that guides and informs the choices that we make every day. Jesus graciously tells us this story so that we can take and look inside of our own hearts and see whether we are choosing what matters most out of this place or if we are choosing something foolish instead.

Notice with me that Jesus tells this story in Luke 12 in response to someone in the crowd who is worried about an inheritance. The unnamed man who speaks up from the crowd is most likely a younger brother who will at best, be second in line for any inheritance or maybe not in line at all. Whatever the case, the man confronting Jesus was concerned about his inheritance, more specifically about the inheritance he wasn’t getting. He was concerned about things. He was concerned about stuff and whether he would ever get any of it.

Have any of us ever worried about stuff? About things? About whether we are going to have enough of it? Or any of it at all?

Have any of us ever lost sleep over stuff? Over what we don't have? Or what we do have?

Have any of us ever been frustrated with stuff? With what we have or don't have? Or what our brother or friend or neighbor has that we don't have?

I suspect we can all identify with the man in the crowd who wants his brother to give him half of the inheritance. If we are honest with ourselves, Ken Bailey reminds us in his commentary on this story, we know that all too often "...possessions are bonded to a deep, often irrational fear—the fear of one day not having enough."

Look with me again how Jesus responds to the man's request. What does Jesus say? Jesus says to the man:

"Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"

Darrel Bock, a professor of New Testament studies, in his commentary reminds us that although rabbis in Jesus' day often did settle such disputes about inheritance, and that the man must have sensed a fairness in spirit that would qualify Jesus to settle the dispute (see Fred Craddock's commentary on Luke), Jesus refuses to get involved in the dispute.

Rather than getting into the middle of the dispute between just this man and his brother, Jesus pivots to the entire crowd and instead uses the man's situation to explore a proverbial truth that affects every one of us. Instead of just warning the man, Jesus warns the whole crowd, including us here this morning. Listen again to the warning Jesus gives.

I. THE WARNING – Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

Watch out for all kinds of greed Jesus says. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed!

Why do you think Jesus made this pivot? Why does Jesus warn all of us to watch out and to be on guard against all kinds of greed?

To answer this, we need to know what greed is and what it does to us. How would you define what greed is? Would you know it when you saw it? Experienced it? Felt it? For the next few moments, turn to a person sitting nearby you and work together to define what greed is. See if you and your partner can come up with a definition for greed that is 15 words or less.

Anyone want to share the definition you and your partner came up with?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines greed this way: intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or food.

Wikipedia defines greed this way: Greed is an uncontrolled longing for increase in the acquisition or use of material gain; or social value, such as status, or power.

Why does Jesus pivot away from the man's dispute towards the crowd and talk about greed? Because Jesus is concerned with our hearts. Greed is fundamentally a heart issue. Greed affects and influences how and why and what we choose to do or not do. Remember what August said to Lily? The hardest thing for us to do is to choose what matters. Greed blocks, disrupts, prevents, and confuses our heart's ability to choose what matters most.

Wikipedia goes on to note for us that Greed has been identified as undesirable throughout known human history because it creates behavior-conflict between personal and social goals.

Jesus warns us about greed because he knows it will tear us apart. Jesus knows that greed will drive a wedge between us and those around us. Jesus know that greed will drive a wedge between us and our God. Jesus knows that greed will ultimately turn us into fools. Therefore, he says, Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed!

To help the man, and the crowd that is gathered around him, as well as us here this morning, understand exactly what all kinds of greed can do to us, Jesus tells a short parable.

As we read Jesus' parable again, listen for what greed does to the man in the story.

"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' ²¹ "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

What do we learn greed does to us from this story?

1. Greed affects us individually; it focuses us on ourselves

Notice with me the pronouns the rich man uses in verses 17-19. What do you notice about the pronouns the rich man uses?

¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

"I, my, I, my, I, my, I, myself, you (singular)."

Bailey reminds us that this is a sad, lonely, and selfish scene. "In the middle east, village people make decisions about important topics after long discussions with their friends. Families, communities, and villages are tightly knit together. Everybody's' business is everybody's else's business." But not so with this man Bailey notes. He "...appears to have no friends. He lives in isolation from the human family around him. And with an important decision to make, the only person with whom he can have a dialogue is himself."

2. Greed affects our relationship with God

Another thing that greed does to us is hinder our ability to see and recognize the ultimate sources of our provision and wealth.

Notice with me what yielded the abundant harvest in Jesus' story. Notice with me the source of the rich man wealth. Was it the rich man? Was it his skills and talents that yielded the harvest?

No, it was the ground that God created that yielded the harvest. Without the ability of the ground to provide and yield a harvest, this man has nothing. Without sun, soil, seed, and rain this man has nothing. This man is dependent on the ground. He needs its ability to produce. He needs the good gifts of God for his wealth.

3. Greed affects our relationships with others

Greed also affects our relationship with others.

Notice with me that nowhere does the man acknowledge anyone else. There is no mention of those who harvest and work the fields. There is no mention of those who tear down and build the barns. There is no mention of those who buy the grain. There is no mention of sharing any of the abundance and surplus with others. Greed blinds this man to those around him. And if we are honest, doesn't greed to the same to us?

You and I need other people for our own provision just like the man in Jesus' story does. If we are in the real estate business, we need people to move and buy houses; if we are in the car sales business, we need people to crash, or wear out, get sick of their cars so that they will buy a different one; if we are in the education business we need students to show up and be willing to learn; if we are plumbers, we need pipes to leak and children to clog drains.

But greed has the power to blind us to this reality. Greed blinds us to the reality that we are dependent on upon God and other people and things for whatever provision and wealth or success we may have.

Greed turns us inward. Greed makes us selfish. Greed makes us the center of the universe. Greed prevents us from choosing what matters most.

Think about your family/household for a moment. What does greed do to family dynamics when there is only one cookie left and more than one family member in your household?

When you and your siblings are settling your parent's estate, what does greed do to the conversations and relationships with your siblings?

When you are on a sports team or a team project at work, what happens to the team dynamics when one of your teammates/coworkers gets greedy with the spotlight?

Greed enables us to exchange love for God and others with a love for stuff and status. This Jesus says this is a very foolish trade.

Why is it such a foolish trade?

Notice what the rich man said to himself:

"You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

The rich man believed that his life came from the surplus of grain in his barn.

Notice what happens next.

'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?

Friends having more stuff or status, does not guarantee a long easy life. Human life does not come through things and stuff and status. Human life is on loan from God. It is a gift, not a right. Ken Bailey reminds us that we are sadly mistaken when we start to believe that security and the good life are found in the acquisition and storing of more and more possessions or status.

This reality became real to me when I was younger and finally realized how much stuff the rich people, people I often envied, took with them when they died. All their stuff didn't prevent them from dying. And when they died, they took none of it with them.

II. THE CURE = BEING RICH TOWARDS GOD

So, if greed has the power to turn us into a selfish, lonely, fools; if greed makes us choose things that don't matter over things that do matter, what is the cure? What do we need in our hearts to choose what does matter?

Jesus says the cure is being rich toward God. Rather than storing up things for yourself, be rich toward God. Jesus says crave, value, acquire, store up what God provides. Make God primary and stuff and things and statues secondary. Be rich towards God.

How do we be rich toward God?

1. Practice Sabbath

One way that we can be rich toward God is by taking a break. Keeping Sabbath is anti-greed. Taking a break is anti-greed. Stepping away from things and stuff and status is good for our heart and soul. When we take a break, when we shut off our computers and phones, when we log out, when we stop working for a day or two like our lives depend upon what we do or don't do, we are able to remember that life comes from God and allow the riches that only God can provide to be welcomed and received.

We become rich toward God by practicing Sabbath.

2. Give things, wealth, and possession away

Another way we become rich toward God is through generosity. Generosity is anti-greed. How do we demonstrate that things or stuff or status doesn't have a foolish hold on us and our heart? We give it away. We let someone else borrow it. We let someone else use it. We let it go. If we can't let it go friends, it has a hold on us.

Our God demonstrated this type of radical generosity to us through the gift of himself and his Son, Jesus Christ. Philippians 2 reminds us that Jesus did not hold on to anything, but rather...

⁶...being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

We are to have this same mindset. We are to have this same "heart set."

We become rich towards God through generosity, by letting go of stuff and status.

3. Don't be defined by things you have and/or don't have; let your identity in Christ and God define you instead

And instead...embracing our identity in Jesus Christ.

Friends, we live in a world that seeks to define us in all kinds of different ways, the vast majority of which are not helpful, healthy, or redemptive. Most often the world defines us in terms of things, status, and stuff of this world. It defines us by what we either have or don't have. The world defines us by our house, our education, our vehicle, the condition of our lawn, our waistline, our hair color, our bank account, our skin color, our gender, our _____...what would you add to this list?

However, there is another way for us to define ourselves. There is another way for us to be rich towards God. It is to allow ourselves to be defined by God; to have our identity defined by who God and Jesus Christ say that we are. Take a look for a moment at this "Identity in Christ" list on the screen...

I am God's child (John 1:12)
I am justified (Romans 5:1)
I belong to God (1 Corinthians 6:20)
I am a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20)
I am adopted as his child (Ephesians 1:5)
I am forgiven (Ephesians 1:8; Colossians 1:14)
I am alive with Christ (Ephesians 2:5)
I am God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10)
I have God's power (Ephesians 6:10)
I am not alone (Hebrews 13:5)
I am His disciple (John 13:15)
I am chosen and dearly loved (Colossians 3:12)
I am crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20)
I am born again (1 Peter 1:23)
I am a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)
I am redeemed (Galatians 3:13)

Friends, cars can't do these things. Houses can't do these things. Degrees can't do these things. Careers can't do these things. Clothes can't do these things. Things can't do these things. Only God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, can do these things. Therefore, Jesus says, "...be rich towards God."

4. Pay attention to the pronouns we use when talking about the things God's has provided to us or blessed us with.

A final way to be rich towards God is when it comes to talking about any of the stuff or status or possessions we do have, we pay attention to the pronouns we use. We need to talk less or not at all about self and talk more about God and others instead. Pay attention to the types of pronouns you are using. Are they 1st person, singular, possessive ones, just like the rich young fool used in the Jesus story (I, me, and my)? Or, are they 2nd and 3rd person pronouns that recognize and celebrate God and others. (His, hers, theirs, they,)

How we talk about things and our stuff reveals the condition and state of our heart. If we are rich towards God, the pronouns we use when talking about things and stuff are going to demonstrate this richness toward God and give the credit and spotlight to what God is doing and providing for us. The pronouns we use will point others toward what God and those around us are doing.

Conclusion:

Friends, “The hardest thing on earth...” August says to Lily, “is choosing what matters.”

It is hard to choose community over self

It is hard to choose generosity over our fear of “Will there be enough for me?”

It is hard to choose being concerned about another person’s well-being over and above or at least in addition to our own well-being.

It is hard to choose the well-being of your special needs sister over a crazy Carolina Pink paint color of your house.

It is hard to choose what matters.

However, Jesus says since our lives “...do not consist in the abundance of our possessions” it is far better for us to guard ourselves against all forms of greed and to be rich towards God than to foolishly store up things for ourselves and be rich in the things that don’t matter.

Are you choosing what matters?

Prayer:

Father in Heaven, choosing what matters is all too often the hardest thing to do. Free us from all forms of greed. Help us to hold stuff loosely and to hold on to you tightly. Enable us to be rich toward God. Enable us to be rich in what does matter. Just as you God are so generous with us, help us to be generous with those around us. In Jesus name we pray. AMEN