

Luke 12: 13-21
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
October 6, 2024

Fool's Gold

The late comedian George Carlin has a bit about “stuff:”

You got your stuff with you? I'll bet you do. In your pockets and purses ... Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff. That's what life is all about, tryin' to find a place for your stuff! That's all your house is; a place to keep your stuff. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. And when you leave your house? You gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. That's what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get ... more stuff! So now you got a houseful of stuff. And, maybe, put some of your stuff in storage. Storage! Imagine that. There's a whole industry based on keepin' an eye on other people's stuff.

And we love our storage here in the US. The self-storage sector is huge, with annual industry revenue of \$39.5 billion encompassing 49,000+ storage facilities, taking up 1.9 billion square feet. Over 10% of American households have to rent storage for their stuff. Hoarding disorder is an official mental health diagnosis as of 2013 as has been illustrated with the various shows and documentaries about hoarding.

Jesus' parable in this week's reading from Luke is usually known as “The Rich Fool.” It could be titled “A Place for Your Stuff.”

Jesus declines a real-time request to adjudicate a matter of family inheritance.

“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?”

This is all the context we get, but the request sounds reasonable, doesn't it? After all, the guy isn't asking to inherit more than his brother; he just wants Jesus to advocate for basic fairness.

But here's how Jesus responds: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Wait — since when is desiring fairness the same thing as being greedy?

Jesus further complicates things with a parable about a rich landowner who meticulously saves for retirement, only to hear, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

What’s wrong with planning ahead, saving for a rainy day, or making prudent wealth management choices?

And then, Jesus concludes his parable with one more warning: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” What does that mean? What does it mean to be “rich toward God?”

I think Jesus is talking about an entire mindset here. A new way of thinking altogether about our relationship to “stuff.” Three things came up for me:

1 - The mindset of independence vs. interdependence.

When the rich man talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is himself: “What should I do, for I have no place to store *my crops*?” “I will do this: I will pull down ... I will store ... I will say to my soul.”

He has no thought about what kind of community it takes for him to be this wealthy. There were no John Deere tractors and no combines. Getting the crop in required workers. He can’t see the people who are actually doing all the work because greed makes you blind to others.

In 2015, Dan Price, CEO of Gravity Payments in Seattle, made headlines by raising the minimum salary for all employees to \$70,000 a year, significantly cutting his own salary to do so. This bold move aimed to combat income inequality and improve employee well-being, resulting in increased morale, productivity, and retention rates at the company. Price’s commitment to fair wages fostered a supportive workplace culture and sparked a national conversation about the importance of equitable compensation in business. His motivation: “My employees have done way more for me than I have done for them.” Interdependence.

Contrast the self-centered mentality of building bigger barns for “my stuff” with a more generous perspective: “You all have done such an amazing job this year that my barns can’t hold everything you’ve planted, cultivated, and harvested! Let’s make sure this bounty doesn’t go to waste — take what you can use, and let’s donate the surplus to those in need in our community.” This way, he could save money by avoiding the need to tear down and rebuild larger barns.

Wouldn’t that be a holy celebration? Wouldn’t the farmer feel honored to be able to return something extra to those who’d made him successful?

2 - The mindset of Scarcity vs. Abundance.

Some things you already know: scarcity and value are connected. Why does Steph Curry get paid \$655,000 PER GAME? Because he can do what almost no one else can do. So we value scarcity ... but it also scares us to death.

J. Paul Getty, when asked about how much money he needed, Getty reportedly replied simply with "more."

In the rich landowner, Jesus sees a person drowning in self-absorption, enamored with his own power, and oblivious to his own mortality. A proud, "self-made" man, isolated, insecure man who lives in the hell of having abundance, but opting for scarcity fear instead. And that's where scarcity will land you, usually. Disconnected, insecure, and selfish.

Having more, having less, neither will solve the scarcity mindset.

Remember how the scarcity mindset played out during Covid? Well, for some reason, obsessed over toilet paper! Terely and I were taking a walk during Shelter in Place and a garage door opened as we were walking by ... wall to wall toilet paper. The man looked at us, sheepishly.

Sarah Bessey, in a blog entitled Rethinking Scarcity said:

"The myth of scarcity tells the powerful to accumulate and take and dominate, to be driven by the fear of Not Enough and Never Enough," she writes. We stockpile money and food and comforts at the expense of one another and our own souls."

And further: Scarcity tells us to work until we drop. But in the liturgy of abundance, we practice Sabbath. Exhaustion and burn-out are symptoms of scarcity: wholeness, joy, rest are hallmarks of a life lived within abundance.

What would it mean for you to adopt an abundance mindset, regardless of your circumstances? This mindset is grounded in your union with God, who is always lovingly gazing upon you. It invites you to love yourself as God loves you. You are more than what you can acquire, produce, or how useful you are to others.

1. You are enough.
2. God is with you.
3. And all will be well.

Three of the hardest, but most liberating things you can believe.

3 - The Mindset of Greed vs. Gratitude

These are all interconnected. We cultivate an abundance mindset through interdependence, recognizing we are not alone. We nurture this interdependence with gratitude, acknowledging that everything we have comes from God, our cooperation with one another, and by living with an open hand.

If you believe, or for some of us remember, that all we have been given is from God...that the world and everything in it belongs to God... and that every good thing we have received has been given for the good of ourselves and our neighbor and the world God loves, you will be rich toward God.

This is one of the few times Jesus warns us to "watch out" for a vice. Unlike other sins that involve conscious choices, greed is sneaky. Therefore, gratitude must be intentional — a daily spiritual practice of recognizing God's abundance. Being rich towards God is more about receiving than giving. When we experience God's love and fill ourselves with gratitude, generosity naturally follows, as gratitude frees us from the fear of scarcity.

Because in a world that begs us to live in the scarcity of not enough, the love and grace of God is something that never runs out, that gives us something to REST in. And having received it we are free to give it away as passionately, indiscriminately and wantonly as God does.

Amen.