

Life ≠ Possessions

Luke 12:13-21

Farmville Baptist Church

August 7, 2022

Some people are storytellers. My son is one of them – he loves to tell a story, and they are always fascinating to listen to, even when they don't always make sense. Storytellers, good and experienced storytellers, are a special kind of person. They can draw you in, work around an issue, and leave you at the end saying, “Wow!” I love storytellers. One of my favorite storytelling preachers is Fred Craddock, who has gone on to glory now but who I was fortunate to hear in person once at the beginning of my ministry. He was the sort of preacher who could hold you in the palm of his hand – this short, wizened guy behind a pulpit who could leave you at the end of the sermon saying, “Wow!” and not

knowing if 5 or 30 minutes had passed since he started preaching. There are preachers who you could pick up their sermon and preach it for yourself – but not Fred. His storytelling ^{was} just such a part of him, you can't imitate it. I should know – I've tried!

Jesus, you may have noticed, was a storyteller. Some of his stories have stayed with us: the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the lost sheep. Yet one of the things we may miss when we run across these stories, or parables, of Jesus is that they were never told in a vacuum. All of Jesus' parables, his stories and anecdotal sayings, were told for a purpose: they were part of his teaching about the kingdom of God. And that is true for our story today, the parable of the rich fool.

Now, many good stories will leave us with a lot to chew on – multiple lessons we can take away from it – and that is true for this story, too. This passage could be the core of a

good stewardship sermon, of course, making us uncomfortable and reminding us to give to the work of God and not just hoard our money for ourselves. And that is certainly something we should remember and learn. But today I want to take a bit of a different angle – an angle focused on the situation that caused Jesus to tell this story.

The initiating incident for this particular parable of Jesus is a request that he received from someone in the crowd. A man gets Jesus' attention and says to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." As a preacher in a modern society, that strikes me as unusual – I've never had a congregant ask me to arbitrate a family dispute over inheritance – but Jesus wasn't a modern-day preacher. He was, among other things, a first-century Jewish rabbi. He was an expert in the Jewish religious law, and, as Australian theologian Michael Frost points out, "in cases of legal

disputes over inheritances Jewish law allowed for the arbitration of a rabbi.”¹ And such arbitration may have been needed more often than we might think. Jewish law, in the absence of a will, specified how inherited wealth would be divided – usually equally divided among the sons, perhaps with an extra portion for the eldest – but it was almost always land, not cash. And it isn’t exactly equitable for one brother to get the portion of the land with the homestead and the water source and the other brother to get the patch of rocky soil that won’t grow anything but more rocks. So when it came time to determine the inheritance, some negotiating and horse-^{trading} ~~trading~~ inevitably occurred.

But there was nothing that said you had to get a rabbi involved. You only did that if you and your brother could not agree. And whether or not the man in the passage today was

¹ Michael Frost, *Jesus the Fool: The Mission of the Unconventional Christ*, 139.

trying to swindle his brother or merely trying to get what was rightfully and fairly his, getting a rabbi involved – publicly – was a pretty big step. It would certainly make things awkward at the next family get-together. And it presents Jesus with a dilemma: does he step into the fray, helping one brother defend his rights over the other and risk the fracturing of that family relationship? Or does he turn the man down, leaving him with the situation that has made him so furious and sowing the seeds of a family rupture anyway? This man may very well have a case for his right to a better division of the inheritance – but at what cost? And will that cost be worth it, whichever way Jesus decides?

So Jesus does what he often does: he turned the question back at his questioner, inviting him to reexamine ^{his} ~~his~~ own situation and motives. “Man,” he says, “who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he includes the

crowd, but still speaks to the man: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”² Wow! Imagine coming up to Jesus, seeking his help on a legal, financial matter – and this is what he comes back at you with – in front of everyone!

Michael Frost points out,

“The statement, by design, was provocative. If a person’s life is not defined by what he owns, how is it defined? If we are not defined by how we dress, what we drive, where we live, what we earn, how we furnish our homes, where we educate our children, how then are we defined? The man, no doubt, stepped back from Jesus. He began to realize that he might have engaged the wrong rabbi. But the rabbi was not going to let him disappear into the crowd so easily. He launched into a

² Luke 12:14-15

creative and cautionary tale, as if to say, ‘You came seeking wealth from me. Well, I will judge in your favor if you like. I will give you back your greatest asset. For there is far greater gain at stake here than getting your inheritance. And there is greater loss at stake than losing it.’”³

And that’s when Jesus the storyteller shows up.

The yarn he spins is immanently believable: a wealthy landowner who stumbles into a windfall – an over-abundant crop – and has to grapple with how to handle the surplus. What do you think he could do with the extra grain? Frost points out that anyone in the crowd that day would have known that the man should have done two things. First, he should have given praise to God for this abundance – a harvest beyond human capability, a harvest he hadn’t earned

³ Frost, 142.

(almost like an inheritance). Tangibly, this would have included a gift of some portion of the crop for the local synagogue or the Temple in Jerusalem, where it would have been used for the support of the priests and teachers and the care of the poor. Second, the man should have thrown a party – he should have celebrated with his community to share his good fortune around. Frost says, “Every Jew knew that without the connectedness of your community, you had nothing. To Jews in first-century Palestine, it was survival....There was no such thing as a private affair. Your affairs were the community’s affairs and the community’s affairs were yours.”⁴

But what did the man in the story do?

“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

⁴ Frost, 143.

surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"⁵

The man keeps all the grain, every last kernel, for himself. It's far more than he needs, far more than any man needs. His own quite-capable barns were too small for all the abundance he had stumbled into. Yet even with more material wealth than he is capable of using – literally, as Jesus points out that he has mere hours to live – even with all of that, he can only think of himself. In this story, Jesus “had neatly sketched the most pathetic of images; a man with everything to live for, who has refused to live, who disconnected himself from life, from God, from his community. He is a contemptible and rueful character.”⁶

There is nothing redeeming about this man.

⁵ Luke 12:18-19

⁶ Frost, 144.

And yet...

And yet how many of us have known someone like this man?

How many of us have had an uncle or a cousin or a stepsister who had nothing to do with the family until a will was opened for distribution – and then fought tooth and nail for every cent?

How many of us have had a neighbor who wouldn't lend you their garden hose if your house was on fire?

How many of us have had friends who spend all their time ranting about how they've earned every penny they've ever had as a reason for no one else to receive any help or charity?

How many of us have called to mind a person's face when we've heard this story of Jesus – because we've known someone just like the man in this story?

Jesus ends the story with a turn in the tale that paints everything that went before it in a very poignant, heartbreaking light. “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?’”⁷ For all that he has invested in himself, and not in anyone else or in any other cause, the man will die. And when he does, he will do so alone. “He had lived alone and would die alone. And in Jewish thinking, there was no greater curse than to die alone....Jesus concluded his tale by confirming once and for all that this man was not the least bit rich. He was poor, tragic, alone.”⁸

Then, Jesus turns to the crowd – but more directly, he turns to the man who started all of this with his desire to get a better take of the inheritance – and he says, “This is how it

⁷ Luke 12:20

⁸ Frost, 147.

will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”⁹ Frost elaborates on what Jesus is really saying here. “You be the judge. If you condemn this man [in the story], you condemn yourself...Do you not see now that your greatest wealth lies in your relationship with your brother? Would you still squander that relationship for half the land your father left you?”¹⁰ Many of us view our family and our close friendships as a gift of God; this was even more true in first-century Palestine. To throw all that away – to damage or sever ties with a brother, with a neighbor, with a community, with the kingdom work of God – over something as base and fleeting as wealth? That would be unthinkable.

But we do it all the time.

⁹ Luke 12:21

¹⁰ Frost, 148.

A few minutes ago, I invited all of us to consider who we've known that fit the description of the man in the story – someone who was tight-fisted and self-centered, shallow and greedy, pitiless and uncaring. We can probably all think of someone like that.

But now, I want you to ponder – has that ever been you? And I need to ponder – has that ever been me?

Are we, you and I, all that different from the rich fool in the story? For that matter, and maybe easier to grasp, are we all that different from the man who called out to Jesus, asking for his help to settle a family dispute over an inheritance? Have you ever gotten stubborn over something that was your due? Have I ever gotten snotty and demanding about something that is owed me by right? Have we ever received some benefit, some windfall, some boon that we achieved through happenstance, through privilege,

through the unmerited generosity of someone else – and never given one thought to how we could use that abundance to improve the life of someone else or bring our family, our neighborhood, or our community together in celebration?

I wonder if any of us are actually completely innocent of that. Indeed, I'd be shocked if we were, because we live in a culture and in an era of the world where what matters is what I want, what I feel is right, what I feel is owed to me or what my rights are. Michael Frost tells the story of a young man, a white supremacist, who lived in a middle-class suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. He burned a cross on the lawn of a black family in the neighborhood and was arrested; he had violated a local ordinance about the placing of hate symbols, whether burning crosses, swastikas, or anything else, on public or private property. The penalty was a maximum of thirty days in jail and a fine, but he defended

himself in court over his right to free expression. “To turn free expression of beliefs into a misdemeanor and charge him with disorderly conduct was downright un-American, he said. And he won.”¹¹

That’s the spirit of our age – a young man who did something reprehensible but demanded his rights, and whose rights were upheld, while a terrified African-American family nervously hid behind the curtains of their very own home. And that was the spirit of the man asking Jesus to arbitrate his inheritance case with his brother, because while he may have been right in his claim to a better share of the estate – we simply don’t know – even if he had been right, Jesus’ story highlights that “there are greater riches in this world than your money, your property, your rights, your

¹¹ Frost, 141.

prestige. They are companionship, the sharing of bread, being put together with others, community.”¹²

We don't know what happened to the man who came to Jesus, asking for help arbitrating his inheritance. Maybe he took Jesus' lesson to heart and went home to work the inheritance out with his brother – an awkward conversation, to be sure, but better than arbitrating it in public and imposing his will on his sibling. Or maybe he went off and found another rabbi that would give him the ruling he wanted, with the bigger barns and the righteous satisfaction of coming out ahead. There is honestly no way to know for sure. But maybe, just maybe, he chose a path that put relationship ahead of possessions, because he realized that life is about more than the stuff you have – it's about the people you share it with.

¹² Frost, 153.

If that is what happened, then maybe the man's story became more like the parable New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey composed in 1973:

“A certain man had two sons.

One was rich and the other was poor.

The rich son had no children

While the poor son was blessed with many sons
and many daughters.

In time the father fell ill.

He was sure he would not live through the week
so on Saturday he called his sons to his side
and gave each of them half the land of their
inheritance.

Then he died.

Before sundown the sons buried their father with respect
as custom requires.

That night the rich son could not sleep.

He said to himself,

‘What my father did was *not just*.

I am rich, my brother is poor.

I have bread enough and to spare,

while my brother's children eat one day

and trust God for the next.

I must move the landmark which our father has set in the
middle of the land

so that my brother will have the greater share.

Ah – but he must not see me.

If he sees me he will be shamed.

I must arise early in the morning before it is dawn and
move the landmark!

With this he fell asleep

and his sleep was secure and peaceful.

Meanwhile, the poor brother could not sleep.

As he lay restless on his bed he said to himself,

‘What my father did was *not just*.

Here I am surrounded by the joy of many sons

and many daughters.

while my brother daily faces the shame

of having no sons to carry on his name

and no daughters to comfort him in his old age.

He should have the land of our fathers.

Perhaps this will in part compensate him
for his indescribable poverty.

Ah – but if I give it to him he will be shamed.

I must awake early in the morning before it is dawn
and move the landmark which our father has set!’

With this he went to sleep

and his sleep was secure and peaceful.

On the first day of the week –

very early in the morning,

a long time before it was day,

the two brothers met at the ancient landmarker.

They fell with tears into each other’s arms.

And on that spot was built the city of Jerusalem.”¹³

¹³ Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 72-73.