

“Mismanaging the Miracle”
Luke 12:13-21, 1 Timothy 6:6-12
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
September 26, 2010

Bible Reading

1 Timothy 6:6-12

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

ANTHEM

Introduction

One of the things you and I do

when we go to read and interpret a Bible passage
is to look not only at the text itself,
but also at what may be going on “behind” a given passage.

When the writers of the Bible sat down to write,

they could make certain assumptions about their readers
because they shared things in common with them –
common knowledge, common culture, common experiences.

The challenge for you and me is that

we don’t share that common knowledge and culture
which of course, is where Bible study books and commentaries
and yes, preachers come in.

Part of our job as your preachers

is to go “behind” the lines of the scripture we read
in hopes of giving us all a better chance of understanding
a passage in all its richness and depth.

Well, lurking behind this morning’s Gospel we find

two well-known Old Testament stories.

The first is the story of Joseph.

Perhaps you remember that Joseph

had been appointed by Pharaoh as overseer over Egypt...

and that having been told in a dream

that Egypt would endure seven years of famine,

he wisely initiated a food reserve program

so that Egypt’s people (not to mention God’s chosen people)
would be saved from starvation.¹

The other story is also involves food.

¹ Genesis 41:35-36

You may remember in the book of Exodus
God provided the Israelites daily manna.
Manna fell from heaven...
the people were to collect just enough for a day's meals...
and if they took more than they needed, it would spoil and rot.
There was only one exception to this pattern;
the day prior to the Sabbath they were to gather a double portion
so that they could truly rest on the Sabbath day.
Now, mind you, Jesus never directly mentions these two stories
and neither does Luke.
But they are clearly part of that shared knowledge and experience
through which Jesus' hearers and Luke's readers
understood today's text.
I hardly ever do this
but today I want us to move through this parable verse by verse.

Read Luke 12:13-15

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And 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."

So, Jesus is trying to speak privately with his disciples,
but there's this huge crowd following him...
and suddenly a man from the crowd calls out to Jesus
to settle a dispute he's having with his older brother.
Their father has died and they are arguing over the inheritance.
Well, perhaps detecting in Jesus a fairness of spirit,
the man asks him to referee.
Jesus refuses: "Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?"
by which he may mean: "How can I judge whose greed is right?"²
So, Jesus refuses to become their referee,
yet he does seize this opportunity
to open a window to his kingdom...
and to show them that life not measured by wealth and possessions.
To no one's surprise, he does this by telling them this parable.

Read vs. 16-21

¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰But 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?' ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

² Fred Craddock, Luke, Interpretation Commentary, p. 163.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Most of you know that not too long ago
we got new pew cushions in here.
What you MAY NOT KNOW is that we preachers had these new cushions
specially equipped with “squirm detectors.”
That’s right... squirm detectors...
and we’ve got this little “squirm meter” up here in the pulpit
which lets us know the level of squirming going on out there.
Now, when we did this we understood that this
may be a violation of your constitutional right to privacy,
but just think we could have had an
electric shock mechanism installed at the same time.
We decided that was a bit much.
Well, it’s really quite amazing...
someone came up with a way to measure this –
it’s similar to the Richter Scale... called the Squirm Scale...
So we’ve got this little squirm meter up here ...
and just so you’ll know
it’s in the red zone this morning
which means that many of us
are actually hearing what Jesus is saying..

Beginning in verse 16 we read:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly.”

There are at least two associations triggered by these eight words.³

First, the land.

“The *land* of a rich man produced abundantly.”

From the very beginning Jesus makes clear

the farmer’s abundant harvest is the gift of God.

He may have worked hard, and probably did.

He may have been very honest and able businessman,

I’m sure he was.

But, according to Jesus

it was the soil and seed and sun and rain

that all conspired together to produce this abundant harvest.

It was the ground!

The second association has to do with the Bible’s view of *wealth*.

This was a very rich man...

already rich, even before this bumper crop...

³ A very helpful commentary on this passage is provided by the New Interpreter’s Bible, p.254-257.

and far from being something to shun or feel guilty about,
his wealth was seen as a sign of God's great blessing...
God was pleased with him!
And in his community, this farmer
would be revered and respected as an upright and righteous man –
all because he was so very materially blessed.

However... the Bible also teaches that
with great blessing comes great responsibility.
“To whom much is given, much is expected” –
and the Bible constantly warns that those who are
financially and materially blessed
should be faithful and prudent in the use of their wealth...
which mostly means sharing it with those who have less...
using it for the well-being of the whole community.

OK... moving to verse 17: “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?””
Wealth... and possessions... and lots of stuff –
it's not only a blessing, is it?
It can get in the way... cause storage issues... it can be a problem!
In fact, it's a problem for the Malone's right now
because our basement flooded and we can't figure out
what to do with all our stuff while we fix it.
Some years ago it dawned on me that there is a direct relationship
between my financial situation (i.e. my salary)
and the amount of closet and cabinet space I've had at my disposal.

Which gets us to where Jesus wants us to get all along...
to the farmer... and to us.
Because you see, for Jesus
the problem with wealth is NOT wealth itself.
Nor is the problem a lack of options for what to do with wealth...
the man has lots of options.
The problem, according to Jesus, is the man...
and whether or not he will choose to do the right thing.

Now, we need to notice something important here in verse 17.
It is what this man thinks to himself.
We need to notice because I'll bet you have thought this to yourself...
I know I have!
Whenever you have moved up the salary ladder
or have had a really good business year...
whenever you've received a sizeable inheritance
or finally gotten out from under those college tuition payments.

The man looks out on his bumper crop and thinks to himself:
“What should I do for I have no place to store my crops?
I know! I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones!

Which when looked at from
the perspective of our background Bible stories
makes all kinds of good sense.

Like Joseph socking away food before seven years of famine...
like the children of Israel
gathering twice as much manna before the Sabbath...

this farmer plans to do the faithful and prudent thing:
tear down his silos to build bigger ones
so that he, like Joseph, can feed for his people in lean years...
so that he, like his ancestors gathering double portions of manna,
can share what he has with those in need.

And yet, did you notice? That part never enters his mind.
The thought of sharing his abundance with others
never crosses his mind.

All we need do is listen in on his little conversation with himself:
“What should I do for I have no place to store MY crops? I will do this: I
will pull down MY barns and build larger ones,
and there I will store ALL MY grain and ALL MY goods.”

Pause.

“And I will say to MYSELF:
‘SELF, YOU have ample goods laid up for MANY YEARS;
relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

He never acknowledges God,
never thanks God,
and more than that he never even considers that HIS wealth
might have some connection to another person’s need.

Like many of you, when we were kids my parents implored
my sisters and me to clean our plates at mealtime.

For me, that wasn’t such a big issue
but I can’t count how many times
they told my sisters about all the children in the world
who would give anything to have food sitting before them.
Predictably, their response was, “Well, why don’t you send it to them?”
which only served to make our parents angry *and* ...
to prove that we had missed the point.

Because my parents weren’t so much saying
there were hungry little children
who could use that particular piece of meat
or that particular Brussels sprout.

Their point was that we should be thankful for what we have...
take only what we need...

and that we should know there is a connection
between our abundance and another child's poverty...
between our excess and waste
and another child's basic human needs.

The fourth century monk, Basil the Great,
captured this in a sermon when he said that
nothing belonging to us is ours alone,
particularly that which we have in excess of our daily needs.
"The bread that is spoiling in your house belongs to the hungry.
The shoes that are mildewing under your bed
belong to those who have none.
The clothes stored away in your trunk belong to those who are naked.
The money that depreciates in your treasury belongs to the poor!"⁴

The farmer's selfishness is so complete... so all-consuming...
that the thought of sharing his abundance with others
never even crosses his mind.

Well, no sooner has he made his plans
for a long and comfortable retirement,
than God reveals what only God can know... what the future holds.
"You fool!" God says.
"This very night your life is being demanded of you.
And all the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"
There goes that "squirm meter" again... and rightly so.

This is a most ominous verse:

"You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you..."

Well, let's do our best to hear what Jesus is (and is not) saying here.
First of all, about the man he IS SAYING that he is a fool.

He's not dishonest... he's not a bad man...
he's simply a fool for denying God
and for thinking he could secure his own future.

And second, let's hear what Jesus is and isn't saying
about this man's death.

It would be easy to hear these words
and think God causes this man's death...

I have heard it that way.

Even that God is punishing his selfishness
by seeing to it that he doesn't enjoy
even one grain of his rich harvest.

But that's not the case... read the text:

all that is said is that this man will die this night...
maybe in his sleep.

His death will be marked just like any other death in the village...
they will honor him as a fine, upstanding man of the community...

⁴ As quoted by William Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, August 5, 2001, p. 25

good and righteous and richly blessed by God...
 And they will give him a burial that befits such a man.
 Because you see, they didn't hear his little conversation with himself.
 They don't know that when the lean times came,
 he was planning to keep the harvest all to himself.
 Only we know that... only we know
 what he was thinking
 and how truly, truly foolish it was.⁵
 Which got me to thinking.
 Now, what I'm going to say next is not in the text...
 it's not in the commentaries...
 it's merely the musing of one preacher's over-active imagination.
 But I got to wondering how much time
 the farmer had between the time God spoke to him
 and his death.
 How long did the farmer have to live?
 Because depending on how early in the day God speaks to him,
 there could be time (maybe even hours)
 between realizing how badly he had mismanaged this awesome miracle and his death.
 And what I was wondering is how did he use this time?
 What did he DO with this time?
 Again, I realize that Jesus really isn't interested in these few hours,
 but I am... and I think maybe you should be, too.
 Because it's this time in which you and I are living right now...
 this time between our hearing this parable and our death,
 whenever that comes.
 The question is what will we do in the time we have?
 And particularly, what will we do
 with the abundant harvest God has blessed us with?
 Store up treasures for ourselves?
 Relax... eat... drink... be merry?
 Or find some way,
 some better way, in this the wealthiest society of all time,
 to be rich toward God? Amen.

¹ Genesis 41:35-36

¹ Fred Craddock, Luke, Interpretation Commentary, p. 163.

¹ A very helpful commentary on this passage is provided by the New Interpreter's Bible, p.254-257.

¹ Psalm 24:1

¹ As quoted by William Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, August 5, 2001, p. 25

¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable, Mismanaging the Miracle, Fortress, p. 139.

⁵ Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable, Mismanaging the Miracle, Fortress, p. 139.