

ADVERSE CAMBER

Luke 12:13-21

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

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This week and next, we will ponder the wisdom of Jesus regarding the relationship between wealth and spirit. Next week we will listen as he meets a rich ruler and talks about camels and the eyes of needles. Today, though, in the passage Barbara read, we hear Jesus tell a simple parable about a highly-successful, well-to-do farmer who faces a storage quandary about all the crops he has produced.

¹⁸[So] 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 towards God.’

It is an engaging story... clearly one of the most compelling of the parables, this story of the rich fool. The parable is rooted in a simple request someone brings to Jesus – a request for help with a family dispute about an inheritance. But that request becomes a platform on which Jesus lays out a warning about the dangers of greed... and a reminder that no one’s life is based on an abundance of possessions. Let me tell you a story, Jesus says, and the story he tells is of a rich landowner whose land produces an abundant harvest, and of the calculations this landowner performs leading to his conclusion that even his ample grain elevator isn’t big enough for all those crops. So, he resolves to tear down his existing storage facilities and build bigger ones, so that he will be set for life. The problem, Jesus says, is that the man has left God out of the equation. So, God speaks to this rich man and calls him a fool, because God knows that the man’s life is coming to an end that very night. All these things you have prepared, God inquires, whose will they then be? And then Jesus says such is the case with any person who builds a personal treasure but is not rich toward God. It is a haunting story, and an unsettling conclusion... even in these post-enlightenment, post-modern days.

Two things, in particular, are striking in this story. The first is the way God addresses the landowner. God doesn’t call him, “Reprobate”... doesn’t say, “You sinner!” God calls him a fool. “You fool!” God says. You *fool!*

Now, what is it, exactly, that makes this man a fool? To many, his actions may seem prudent, forward-thinking, progressive. Why would he be considered a fool? That

question has long intrigued me. Several years ago, I spent an afternoon with a group of friends and colleagues who were wrestling with that very question as part of a friend's Doctor of Ministry project, and so it was still in the back of my mind a few weeks later when, during a summer trip to northwest England, quite unexpectedly, I came across a hint of an answer. We were in the car, traveling from the village where we were staying north of Manchester to the Yorkshire town of Haworth – a town made famous, you may remember, by the Brontë sisters who lived and wrote there with their pastor father in the mid-nineteenth century. The trip involved crossing the moors, a vast expanse of rolling grasslands and sedges that, even in summer, seemed to warn of imposing wintry weather. The road across the moors that day was not very good... about one-and-a-half lanes of semi-paved thoroughfare bordered on one side by the hillside above and on the other by even more hillside below.

We were making our way across the moors and approaching a sweeping left turn when I saw the road sign. The sign had an arrow noting the turn we were approaching, and underneath the arrow were the words, "Adverse Camber." We were, I suppose, a hundred meters down the road, just coming out of the curve, when the sign registered, and I asked, "What did that sign say?" My cousin Alex was quick to respond. "It's my favorite British road sign," he said. And then he explained what you likely already know. Camber is tilt or slope, or an arching. "Adverse camber" on that sign described a road that arches and slopes or tilts the wrong way. In our particular case, the sign spoke of a left hand turn in which the road, instead of banking to the left, actually sloped away to the right.

I love road signs in the UK. And I had to laugh at the British understatement of danger in that sign. Adverse camber, indeed! I wondered how many people had driven off the road and down the hillside pondering what the sign meant. However, as the day and the trip wore on, I began to think of the road sign as a metaphorical explanation of why Jesus describes the rich landowner as a fool. It is because his life slopes the wrong way. Instead of cambering toward God in gratitude and toward neighbors in graciousness, it had tilted precariously toward his own greedy assumptions. Instead of banking toward its source, his life had become imbalanced, and the centrifugal forces of avarice and self-indulgence were ready to run him off the road. A fool indeed!

Some of you, I suspect, have heard Michael Lindvall's helpful observation about the hidden danger in all the various things we acquire in the course of our lives. Whenever we buy something new, he says, when we open the box we are customarily greeted, not only by the thing itself, but by pages of written materials: owner's manuals, assembly diagrams, directions for use, warranty cards, surveys and the like. All these pages, Michael says, can be classified in one of two categories, either as instructions or warnings: "*instructions* on assembly, use, and maintenance, and *warnings* not to let kids put pieces in their mouths, not to use this product in the bathtub... [or] without safety goggles." But Michael says:

Maybe they should put one more *instruction* page in every box. It could say, “You are a fortunate consumer to have the ability to own this fine product. Remember to share what you have.” And maybe they should put yet another *warning* label on every new product. In bold red letters in a white decal affixed to the side, it could read: “Warning: This thing, like all things, could be dangerous to your spiritual health.”¹

In Great Britain, of course, the decal could be less specific; it could simply say: “Peril of adverse camber.” I would argue today that it is his failure to recognize just such a peril that makes the rich fool a fool. He doesn’t even realize that his life is tilted the wrong way.

“So it is,” Jesus said, “with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” That statement, of course, raises the other significant interpretive question, the other striking feature, about our passage this morning: what does it mean to be “rich toward God?” Later in this same chapter of Luke, Jesus will point to the linkage between the location of one’s treasure and the location of one’s heart, and in another story, recorded in each of the three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus will speak of laying up treasure in heaven. Is that what he means by being rich toward God?

Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes that “rich toward God” is a literal translation of the Greek and suggests that for Luke, the phrase holds two levels of meaning: the first has to do with the faith we claim, the second points toward the disposition of our possessions in accordance with that faith, and more precisely our willingness to share them with others rather than accumulating them for ourselves.² Moreover, I think of “rich toward God” as an attitude toward life, framed by gratitude to its Source. I think of it as a life cambered toward its true Center.

Athey Keith is a Kentucky farmer in Wendell Berry’s wonderful novel *Jayber Crow*. He was the kind of farmer who eschewed the modernization and machine-driven agriculture of the corporate farm in favor of a kind of farming that took note of the needs of the land and tried to live in harmony with it. Athey Keith owned a lot of property near Port William, but Berry describes him this way:

Athey was not exactly, or not only, what is called a “landowner.” He was the farm’s farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived

¹ Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, Louisville, Geneva Press, 2001, 115. Italics mine.

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991, 199.

his; [and] he knew that of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter.³

In my life, I have known a whole generation of people like that... not necessarily farmers, though farmers seem to understand the contingencies of life better than most others. But I have known many people who came of age in the 1930s, say, whose lifelong values were built around concepts not of bigger and faster and more productive, but of balance and proportion and scale. “He was the farm’s farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his....”

Now, if the truth be told, I am the product of a different generation. I grew up believing the old motto of General Electric: “Progress is our most important product.” I am also a creature of comfort, a beneficiary of convenience, a child of technology and innovation. I am disciplined about my resources to some degree, but I still tend to confuse wants and needs from time to time. Like others of my generation, I am also a person who prefers control to contingency... or at least the illusion of control.

While there are many people who see life through the lens of abundance – that is, who see a world full of gifts and of a gracious sufficiency – there are others who always encounter the world by way of an anxiety about scarcity – who worry often that there won’t be enough, and so feel the need to grasp, to hoard, to build bigger barns, if you will. In her book, *The Soul of Money*, Lynne Twist speaks of “sufficiency”:

By sufficiency, I don’t mean a quantity of anything. Sufficiency isn’t two steps up from poverty or one step short of abundance. It isn’t a measure of barely enough or more than enough. Sufficiency isn’t an amount at all. Sufficiency resides inside each of us, and we can call it forward. It is a consciousness, an attention, an intentional choosing of the way we think about our circumstances.⁴

Something like that sense may have been behind Athey Keith’s understanding of his life and vocation and the land. Wendell Berry didn’t use the word specifically, but behind the metaphors he employed to depict Keith was a profound sense of the *stewardship* of the earth... of the stewardship of life. A deep-rooted sense of stewardship simply affords one a different way of understanding this world. By stewardship one sees life not in terms of control, but in terms of service and sacrifice for something much larger than our own selves – the the kind of service and sacrifice people admired about John McCain. A steward sees the world not in terms of limitless bounty, but in terms of thoughtful limits and appropriate boundaries. A steward lives and breathes a sense of

³ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, New York, Counterpoint Books, 2000, 182.

⁴ Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 2003, as cited by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *God, Improv, and The Art of Living*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018, 144.

sufficiency. Stewards know that the earth is ours, not in the sense that it belongs to us, so much as because, by the expenditure of our energy and work, we belong to it.⁵

A few weeks ago I shared with you the words of Grove McCord, Clyde Edgerton's character, who said, "You are history longer than you are fact."⁶ Stewards understand that truth; they get that life is fleeting, and that the faithful way of responding to that fact is not so much to acquire all we can acquire, building bigger and bigger barns, or even to see the earth and its riches as our rightful inheritance, but to know at our depths that we borrow the earth and its riches from our children and from generations yet unborn. Stewardship teaches us to number our days, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

It is more than romanticism that has allowed Wendell Berry's description of Athey Keith to move me so. I know myself well enough to know that I can be the romantic, the idealist, from time to time. But there is a sculpted realism about me, too, that has come from watching so many people die over the years... good people, gracious people, dear friends whom I have loved. I have watched so many of them come to terms with the fact that all their striving and all their acquisitiveness, even all their best efforts, ultimately had to be relinquished and entrusted to someone else. Ultimately, sooner for some than for others, their whole lives had to be handed back to God. In the end, many of them came to understand that the only things that would finally matter after they were gone were the good they made possible along the way and their investment of time and energy in those they loved and those they served. I have noticed, too, that those who seemed to find the greatest contentment in the face of life's final mystery were those who had lived their lives fully as stewards of the gifts that had been entrusted to them.

Those who farm the land seem to understand such contentment better than many of us, I think... but not always. I have thought a lot about these two landowners, these two farmers – Athey Keith and the one in Jesus' parable. And I have wondered about the difference between them.

Athey Keith may not have been a rich man in worldly terms. He may not have been a particularly intellectual man either, but he was no fool. Indeed, in the language of Luke's Gospel, one might well have called him "rich toward God." He understood the nature of God's abundance; he understood his dependency on that abundance, understood that it was an abundance not of his own making; understood the way he belonged to that abundance far more than it ever belonged to him.

⁵ I borrow this line from another novel by Wendell Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack*, Washington, Counterpoint Books, 1974 (rev. 1999), 125.

⁶ Clyde Edgerton, *In Memory of Junior*, Chapel Hill, NC, Algonquin Books, 1992, 47.

The problem with the rich fool was that he couldn't see that at all. He just didn't get it. Not one bit. As he rounded what would be the last sweeping turn of his life, he had no thought of God – no thought of gratitude – and all that he valued would soon slip away, because his life was so adversely cambered. And yet, *he* thought he was at the top of his game. He never even noticed the danger until it was too late. Of course, that's what made him a fool.