

STUFF

Luke 12:13-21

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 3, 2019

A Pre-word to the Second Lesson

I know I am not alone in coming to worship this morning with a heavy heart over the senseless wasting of human life in El Paso yesterday and in Dayton, Ohio overnight – with at least the first now known to be an exercise of white fear and white nationalism. That there is an epidemic of gun violence and a rising threat of domestic terrorism in our land is beyond dispute. It is symptomatic of the heart disease affecting our nation in these days.

It is not a lack of knowing that afflicts us; it is a lack of will.

Though I will not be addressing this crisis in this morning's sermon, I know you will join me in prayers, not only for a change of heart, but for action – speaking to elected officials and taking steps to move us toward appropriate actions to address the proliferation of assault weapons and gun violence in our land.

Sermon

In the months before we moved to New York, Marla and I were doing some significant cleaning out. Actually, it would be more accurate to say *Marla* was doing some serious cleaning out. I was mostly being supportive... and doing the occasional heavy lifting. The attic. The workshop. The garage. The kids' bedrooms. The china cabinet. We gave some of our possessions away, sold a few, and sent more than a few others to the Habitat ReStore or the Thrift Shop. And I have to say we were astonished at how much we had accumulated in 27 years of living in that house, especially given that we're not collectors.

Those experiences in reducing clutter came back to mind when I re-encountered Luke's parable of the rich fool. And I laughed – albeit nervously – when I came across some old commentary on the parable by Lawrence Wood, then a Methodist pastor in Michigan. He said:

Here in the rural upper Midwest, it seems every other person has a pole barn. Usually it's full of old tires, old brakes, a trailer, dozens of tools gathering rust, coffee cans loaded with lug nuts and screws. But then almost nobody in America lives like the desert monks.

Ed and Edna's place is pretty typical, I think. Her cupboards, bureaus, cabinets, garage, attic and spare bedroom have been crammed full of things that define her. ("Oh, you know Edna Furbelow," says her neighbor, "she collected Hummels.")

Every so often, Edna took some of the clutter out to the front yard and sold it, though no one stepping inside her house ever knew the difference. Now that Edna has died and her husband's pole barn has finally gotten emptied, everything must go.

[Says Wood,] It's too bad she's not here for the lesson, because there's something morally instructive about an estate sale. Absent the owners, the items lose their meaning, so that even Ed and Edna's kids and closest friends think, *[Goodness] ...what a lot of junk!* The agent, who doesn't want to haul it away, has priced everything low: books go for 50 cents, a big set of plates for a few bucks. Here is an old rusty bicycle from the Eisenhower era and a once-prized lamp that now seems hideous. Set out on the green grass outside the barn, Ed's band saw and drill press, his pride and joy, appear headed for retirement. Now the auctioneer calls out Lot 152, a collection of four hundred Hummels. Eyes roll and knowing smiles break out, but no one bids. The auctioneer looks at the estate agent, the agent looks at Edna's oldest daughter: a lifetime's hobby and a person's identity have come to this. It's almost possible to hear Jesus asking, *And all these Hummels, whose will they be?*¹

Edna Furbelow affords us only a glimpse into the point Jesus drives home in his parable of the rich fool. Her collection of Hummel figurines was nothing compared to the huge grain elevators the rich fool needed to store his accumulated wealth, but it does somehow bring us back to the "stuff" of our own lives – all *we* have accumulated over the years – and the attachments that go with such stuff. If you see this as a pitch for contributions to the upcoming yard sale, then good, but that's not my point.

The late comedian George Carlin used to draw lots of laughs talking about all our accumulated "stuff:"

That's all your house is [said Carlin] – a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it, and when you leave your house, you've got to lock it up. You 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. Sometimes you've got to move – got to get a bigger house. Why? [Not enough] room for your stuff anymore.²

We laughed at Carlin because his caricature struck a resonant chord in our experience. We knew he was right, if exaggerating, and that's what made his routine funny. But deep down, given Jesus' words of warning, we know it's no laughing matter. Our homes and apartments – even the more modest ones – contain a myriad of stewardship lessons.³ What we buy and what we store, what we keep, and what we share are glimpses into the

¹ Lawrence Wood, "A Lot of Junk (Luke 12:13-21)," *Christian Century*, July 27, 2004, 20.

² As cited by Mark Sargent in a sermon on the radio broadcast, Day 1, August 7, 2004.

³ Wood.

truth about each of us. When placed next to the poor of the world, who among us is not rich?

At its heart, Jesus' parable of the rich fool is a warning against idolatry. Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says,

Idolatry, in simple terms, is the choice of treating as ultimate and absolute that which is neither absolute nor ultimate.... Functionally ... my god is that which I serve by my freedom.... Our freedom is not found in scattered outbursts of random activity, but in the shaping of a direction [and a pattern] Even if it is hard to discern... there is a pattern to our lives which manifests itself in the many small [choices] we make moment by moment, day by day.⁴

It's not that wealth or possessions are intrinsically evil; they are not. They aren't the problem; the problem is the mind or heart that makes such things into gods – and that happens more subtly than we may think. Consider the patterns of your days – of your needs and your wants, of your habits and your passions, of your bank statements and investment portfolios and your credit card receipts. Consider the ways such patterns mesh or conflict with Christ's call to travel lightly and simply, to share from the abundance we have received, to put the claims of God first in priority.

“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed,” Jesus said; “for one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.” Well, of course, that's right. We know he's right. We do. We could live without our stuff. We could. We could share more than we do. We could. But... let's be honest... there's a certain comfort and security in the stuff – the wealth – we have accumulated. It gives us certain capacities and affords us certain opportunities we would not have otherwise.

It's true, but sometimes the security we think wealth provides is mostly an illusion – especially when a significant crisis comes. Our wealth, as our mutual friend Jon Walton once said, cannot solve some of our most important problems in such times.

[Wealth] will buy you a good oncologist, but it cannot buy one moment of time to extend a life when that life is over. It will get you a good psychiatrist, but it cannot buy sanity or peace of mind. It may attract some hangers on, some companions of sorts, but it cannot buy trust or love or lasting friendship. It can buy you the best of educations, but it cannot confer wisdom. Possessions are, for all we trust them, passing things, of temporal and not eternal worth. And that is what the man with the barns missed. He didn't understand how time works; there are transitory and there are eternal things.⁵

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith*, as cited by Cynthia Campbell in a paper presented to the January 2004 meeting of the Moveable Feast.

⁵ Jon Walton, in his sermon “The Parable of the Man Who Talked to Himself,” preached August 2, 1992 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Wilmington, Delaware.

The problem is, we are all the time confusing the one with the other. To know the eternal things and to live into them is, I believe, what it means to be “rich toward God,” as Jesus says. To live lives consumed by transitory things may be satisfying for a season, but in the end, it leaves us spiritually impoverished – adrift from our moorings, apart from the purposes and relationships that give life meaning. That’s why God calls the rich man “a fool.” “You fool,” he says.

A few weeks ago, following the funeral of a dear friend at the church I served for 26 years, I stepped into the church’s memorial garden. I used to do so periodically, because it was for many years a place of memory and deep gratitude for me. I studied some of the plants, astonished at how much some of them had grown. But mostly I spent my time looking at the names on the wall – so many people I knew and loved across the years. I thought about them, one by one... so many remarkable people. There were the extroverts and the introverts, the up-front leaders and the quiet servants. There were the elderly and the very young... those who died suddenly, tragically, and those whose deaths were long and labored. Of the latter, I remembered watching more than a few 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, and sooner for some than for others, their whole lives had to be handed back to God. As I stood in that sacred space and thought about those dear ones, I reckoned that many of them, in the end, likely came to understand that the only things that would finally matter after they were gone were the good they had made possible along the way and their investment of time and energy in those they loved and those they served. I remembered, too, that those who seemed to have found the greatest contentment in the face of life’s final mystery were those who had counted their lives as full of richness, who had lived their lives as stewards of the gifts entrusted to them.

Our concluding hymn today will be First Church’s own Harry Emerson Fosdick’s beloved hymn, “God of Grace and God of Glory.” I do love that hymn, but confess that one of its verses has always unsettled me – the one that says:

Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss Thy kingdom’s goal.

There are, I believe, at least two ways to be rich. One is to be “rich in things” – to acquire a lot of stuff – wealth and many possessions. The other is to cultivate few needs, and then to discover that all those needs have been met. What are those needs? Well... food, water, of course, but what else? I think, for me, what I need for my life to be full is the company of those I love ... laughter, perhaps... and music... and kindness... and daily hints and reminders of God’s beautiful and abundant grace. In that sense of the word, I would confess that I am a very rich man, indeed.

What about you? What do *you* need for your life to be full? In what way will you be rich?