

“Thanks Living” a stewardship sermon The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Redwoods Presbyterian Church (USA) October 16, 2016

Text: Luke 12:13-21 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘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?’ And 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.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘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?” Then 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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But 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?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

IT SEEMED a little uncomfortable, at first, to rejoin you for worship after all these years, and end up on Stewardship Sunday! My first thought was a very American one: oh that’s personal. I don’t know your affairs, you don’t know mine. This is just not polite! not right. But on second thought, this is a faith community, and for us, stewardship is always very right!

My first observation is that from all evidence, this church is in very good shape! The church I last saw was struggling --a little desperate even, certainly living in a culture of scarcity. You were worried about so many things. Today you have a healthy congregation and a stable rental income and good pastor and staff. According to Pastor Stephanie, you are faithfully meeting goals and responsibilities. This is not only unusual, it is remarkable in current church culture. Congratulations.

So if a successful, improved stewardship drive is not necessary to make ends meet, why the emphasis and importance? Well, it has to do with the very word stewardship. The dictionary (always a good starting point) defines it as the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. It does not mean balancing a budget. And in case any visitor here today is ready to tune out, please hear that stewardship means not just money, but time, love, sharing, family, values, friends – yes, God and God’s love, which never does well locked in a barn. And Stewardship is about facing the fears, grudges, insecurities, greed– anything that you hold on to so tightly that you exclude God and thwart abundance.

So let’s take our cue from the Scripture we heard.

In today’s Gospel, a man interrupts Jesus in the middle of a sermon, and asks him to settle a family dispute about a contested will. In ancient Palestine, it was typical that inheritance be divided 2/3 to an older brother, 1/3 to a younger brother – obviously this was a younger brother who wanted intervention! And it must seemed quite raw and urgent to him, to thrust the question as he did. First our teacher is a bit testy – who are you to ask me this? He refuses to be drawn into the family squabble. But, as he often does, he turns it into a broader teaching opportunity. And of course, he tells a parable. A man had a good run of prosperity. In today’s language, he

had successfully played the stock market. Or he had bought low and sold high in real estate. Or there was a company merger. So wealthy did he become that his barns could not hold all of his crops. His solution was to tear down these barns and build bigger and better barns. Then, with his financial security in hand, he could sit back and truly enjoy life. His philosophy was: eat, drink, and be merry. Until of course, he died.

I suspect this rich man would have identified with the famous Jack Benny skit, where the comedian is walking down the street and meets an armed robber, "Your money or your life!" There is a long pause. Jack does nothing. The robber impatiently queried, "Well?" Jack replied, "Don't rush me, I'm thinking it over."

This rich man could well have fathered the little girl who, whose Sunday school teacher asked the class to draw a picture showing what they'd do if they could spend the day with Jesus. After a few minutes, this little girl asked, "How do you spell Bloomingdales?"

This rich man is the very one John D. Rockefeller had in mind when he was asked "How much wealth does it take to satisfy a person?" He replied, "Just a little bit more."

According to common wisdom, we are not supposed to like this rich man. The underlying assumption is that there is something wrong - cynical, if not sinful - about eating, drinking, and being merry in the face of death's certainty. But are any of you, like me, slightly uncomfortable with this interpretation? I mean, does it actually square with our experience? Most of us do not find hard work, and the benefits it brings, to be evil.

In fact, I think this common interpretation actually flies in the face of Jesus' own tradition. His spirituality was one which emphasized celebration and feasting. While attending the wedding reception at Cana, he saw to it that there was plenty of good wine for everyone - 180 gallons by John's count!! Later, he was carried away when feeding the multitudes by the sea; and, after everyone had eaten their fill, there was enough food left over to fill 12 baskets. Many of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God are about celebrations and dinner parties. Indeed, his critics found sufficient justification in his lifestyle to accuse him of being a "glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34)." Jesus enjoyed eating, drinking and being merry.

I am pretty sure that God never meant us to be miserable!

Jesus did not say the businessman was evil. Jesus said he was a fool. Jesus did not condemn the man for enjoying life, nor even for being rich. He condemned him for not seeing beyond his own success, his own comfort. He left God out of his equation. In his prosperity parade, he was alone in the reviewing stand: His goods, his fruits, his barns. God? Not the first thought.. In four short verses the rich man used the word "I" and "my" ten times. He did not see others as the source of his bounty, or even God, only himself. God was in his life, but he didn't know it. God was in his fruits, God was in his fields, God was in his goods. God was everywhere except in his awareness.

Further, he left other people out of his equation. When his harvest grows so great that it exceeds the storage facilities, all he can think to do is to build more barns! Open more bank accounts, get more safety deposit boxes, buy more stocks.

In not sharing his abundance, he denied others the right to comfort and security and, yes, pleasure. In not looking beyond his own stomach and arrogance, he became a bottleneck in the flow of Shalom, in the distribution of blessings to others. In his greed, he lost out on a relationship with God. By grasping so tightly, he had no room for God.

He died without knowing the awesome exultation of praising and thanking God, and without experiencing the profound satisfaction and grace of sharing with others. He died and left nothing but moldy grain.

This parable condemns the shortsightedness of failing to be a good steward of the abundance that God entrusts to us. And it points out how money is not evil in itself: money can be a blessing or a curse depending upon whether it is our servant or our master, our tool or our tyrant, a means or an end. It reminds us that money cannot buy happiness.

Here is a modern day parable of sorts. One day the father in a very wealthy family wanted to teach his son the value of wealth. He wanted his son to see how poor people lived, thus appreciate and acknowledge his own wealth. He asked one of his lowest paid workers if his son could stay the weekend. When the boy returned home, the father was eager to know how it went.

"It was great, Dad.

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh yeah. I saw that we have one dog and they had four--and chickens and a goat, too. We have a pool in the middle of our garden and they have a creek that goes forever. . We have fancy lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them...I get it, Dad. Thanks for showing me how poor we really are."

According to author Gregg Easterbrook, we are in "abundance denial," a tendency to be blind to our own prosperity. He claims that our abundance of choices creates stress, and our fixation on material goods leaves us searching for some deeper meaning in life. His final theory about our discontentment revolves around a lack of gratitude and sharing. Numerous studies show that a sense of gratitude results in feelings of well-being and optimism. Living with the intention of gracious sharing may be the very key to finding contentment in our lives and proper use of our money.

This is not so much about giving – it is about the art, not the necessity, of sharing. Giving is certainly a good thing-- of time, of things, of money, of thoughts and ideas, of gifts, of sermons and liturgies, of wisdom, of energy, of attention, of support, of advice -- But in the end it allows (and even encourages) a sense of control, self-determination, and moral self-satisfaction. It might also reinforce a sense of being superior to -- or at least of being the benefactor, of others -- a nice status to have in the world.

Sharing is harder because it breaks down that barrier or distance between one's self and others. Sharing simple things like meal planning and cooking, or car rides, or financial planning can be

a challenge -- as my dad used to say, if you want something done right, do it yourself. Or sharing stuff like books or CD's -- there's the worry, will I get them back? Or sharing -- really sharing, time with others, inviting others into your free time -- means getting out of your own space, your own ego. Sharing leadership, letting others work with you, letting others have as much say -- or more -- that can challenge your sense of accomplishment. Sharing money and resources, will always beg the question, will there be enough left? It can be hard. And yet that is what we are asked to do.

The rich man in the parable is like so many in our world today, where money seems to be the end product, the descriptor of success and value, with no moral or spiritual attachment. .

Stewardship is not about church budgets, building programs, or capital campaigns. It's about love. It's about worship. It's about gratitude. It's about abundance.

To member of this church community, if you believe it is essential that this church remain here on this street, making witness, standing tall, keeping doors open, then you will do your part in making that happen. If you know that service and worship and community are essential to your lives, that you gain in knowledge and inspiration and blessings, then God will do God's part in making that happen,

And to all of us, hear these words from John F. Kennedy: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

And these, from Mormon leader Neal A. Maxwell: "We should certainly count our blessings, but we should also make our blessings count."

And finally, from Nazarene preacher W.T. Purkiser: "Not what we say about our blessings, but how we use them, is the true measure of our thanksgiving."

We are blessed, to be a blessing. I wish you the joy of thanks sharing --thanks living. Amen.
