

Sunday: August 1, 2010
Scripture: Luke 12:13-21
Sermon: How Not To Be A Fool

The scripture reads: “Someone in the crowd said to him....” Someone in the crowd? What kind of intro to a story is that? Someone in the crowd! Wasn’t anyone looking? Didn’t anyone see the person who approached Jesus to seek help? Who was this no-name person? Didn’t anyone recognize him?

Well, there is a reason the passage is so nebulous. It does not make any difference who asked the question. In fact, the question is insignificant to the total message of this section of scripture. It serves only to set the stage for the parable which Jesus uses to teach a great lesson. Someone in the crowd said to Jesus: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

Now, for some of us, there is an immediate affinity. Some of us have been there. We have experienced the family eruption that follows the death of a parent or grandparent. The loved one is no sooner in the grave than the family gathers and the will is read and the family is torn into a thousand little pieces. Sometimes it begins before the person is dead. In a previous church, I had the good fortune of knowing a couple who worked hard all their lives and built a wonderful log home, filled with antiques, with a large herd of black angus cattle. And the husband loved nothing more than rebuilding old 55 Chevys. All of that came to a halt when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He had surgery and made a partial recovery. But for the next year his brothers and mother attempted to drive a wedge between this man and his wife. And on the day that the ambulance carried him to the hospital for the last time, the brothers stripped the farm of all the cattle, the antique cars and much of the furniture, including his Masonic pin, fez and apron. A fellow Mason had to loan the distraught wife his pin and apron for the funeral, and I had to officiate at a funeral where the mother and brothers sat on one side of the church and the wife and a few friends sat all alone on the other side of the Church. I vowed to myself that I would never go through something like that again. Six months later I was called to court to bear witness to what the family had done to that man and his wife. There is nothing so destructive as greed. Greed is a form of idolatry! And it is clear from scripture that idolatry is directly counter to our commitment to worship and serve God and God alone.

I know on a personal level what can happen when greed interjects itself into the grief process of a family that has lost a loved one. A little over five years ago, my father died at the age of 97 and three months. He lived a good life and we did not shed too many tears at his passing. He outlived mom by over 17 years. He had lived to welcome 12 great grandchildren into this world. He would sit each new born on his lap and feel their arms and legs and then let his fingers follow the curve of their noses and eyes. You see, by the time he was 95 he was totally blind. But his mind was alert and quick to the very end. The afternoon of the funeral, we gathered at the house to read the will. Mind you now, my father was not rich. He owned his house and a few shares of stock which had come to him through my mother’s side of the family. But mom and dad had always stressed to us four children that everything would be divided equally. My older sister

read the will which stated that everything was to be divided equally. Then she read two codicils to the will which rescinded the will and gave everything to her. She had dad sign these documents even though he could not see. The three of us younger children just sat there in shock. Finally we got up and walked away. Our shock had little to do with the financial aspect of the final disbursement of our parents meger estate. We were in shock because our older sister was so fixated on being the sole recipient of everything that she was willing to fracture the family system to obtain it all.

Jesus hears the stranger's request to arbitrate between he and his brother and he responds by asking "who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you." And then Jesus quickly tacks on a warning: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." And then Jesus tells them a parable: We know it all too well. A rich man produced a bumper crop. He ran out of space to store the grain, figs, olives, pomagranets, bales of wool, gallons of goat cheese or whatever else he was producing. So he thought that he could tear down his storehouses and build bigger ones. The point being that he could store enough so that he could take it easy and have plenty for many years to come. Look at what the rich man says to himself: relax, eat, drink, be merry.

When we first hear this parable, we have to admit that that might be exactly what we would do. Store it up for a rainy day. Take a break from the rigors of the farm. Kick our heels back and enjoy the good fortune that had come to us. Wouldn't we? Remember that banks and savings accounts and stocks and bonds and annuities were not available in those days. If you want to rest on your laurels you need to store some things up for use in future years. My Aunt Ida was born in the late 1800's on a farm in Pennsylvania. She was one of 12 children who lived to adulthood. There was no question about storing things up. Jars and jars of beans and other vegetables. They did not have freezers. Even the sausage was canned. The hogs were butchered and the hams were cured to hang in the smokehouse till they were needed. Bushels of apples were dried so that you could have apple pies all year long. Tomatoes were hung green in the root cellar so that you could fry them up on a cold winter morning to eat along with your angel bisques and gravy. You had to put up enough food to last you till the spring vegetables arrived. Now, what my Aunt Ida's family did was quite different from what the rich man in Jesus' parable did.

The Rich man of whom Jesus spoke was focused totally on himself and his own welfare. Fourteen times the Rich man used some form of "me" in rationalizing his behavior. It's all about "I", "me", and "my". And if he thought he was rich now, just wait until hard times hit and folks had to come to him to buy grain and cheese and olives. Prices would triple if he had anything to do about it. Audrey West, Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago notes in her commentary about this passage: *Those who have possessions in abundance risk the sin of greed. "enough" is never enough, "more" is only to be hoarded, and "I, me, and mine" matter more than anybody else. Greed is a problem primarily because its focus on the self keeps people from being "rich toward God."*

Now, I suspect that no one here this morning would relish the idea of being called a “fool”. If being called a “fool” is OK with you, then I suspect it would be OK for you to take a walk around the block and come back just before the offering. But my guess is that no one likes being called a “fool”. I had to look it up. It is a word we all use from time to time. We have used it from early childhood, before we even understood exactly what it meant. It was a word which we used to put others down. “You Fool!” But do we know what it means? I suppose we have an idea in our minds of what a fool is. In the days of the European Kings, the King always kept someone around who was affectionately called the Court Fool or Jester. This person could do things that no one else could do, even make fun of the King and Queen. But Webster is very specific about this word. A Fool, says Webster, is a “person who lacks sense or judgment.” And when Luke, the Physician, uses the Greek word for fool there is the added connotation of someone who “lacks sense or judgment” about eternal things. In other words, Jesus is making it very clear that an individual who is concerned only about his own welfare is a fool to the detriment of his eternal salvation.

When I moved to Greensboro in the Winter of 1976 to become the pastor at Fellowship Presbyterian Church, I came to know a family in the Church that had been extremely prosperous. The father had made a fortune in the steel erection business, and his daughter and her husband had established a foundry which prospered and provided a very comfortable living. I could tell you lots of stories of how this family used their prosperity in service to God, but the story that most sticks in my mind was something Zell (the daughter’s name was Zell) said to me during stewardship season at Fellowship Church. These were her exact words: “*You know, God has allowed me and Bill to become very rich for a reason, and we plan to use everything we have amassed to touch the lives of others.*” I knew that these were not empty words. Every time you turned around they were supporting a ministry, not only with their wealth, but with their time and efforts. And when Zell got behind a project, she gave her total energy to that project. She was no fool. Unless you could say that she was a “fool for Christ”! And in that case we need to redefine the word fool as being someone who sets aside their own personal sense and judgment and allows the mind of Christ direct her actions.

Now perhaps that is the kind of “fool” we wouldn’t mind being.

It is interesting to note that in this story, Jesus tells us of a man who says to himself, “I think it is time to sit back and relax, eat, drink and be merry.” But do we know that this is a parody of Isaiah 22:13 which actually says, “*Let us eat and drink... for tomorrow we die!*” The rich man failed to connect the dots. The old adage: You cannot take it with you becomes very real, because in this parable Jesus tells his disciples that that very night the rich man’s soul would be demanded of him. Whose riches will they be then?

And then Jesus tacks on this little admonition: “*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*”

Hey! Let’s be clear about this thing. There is nothing wrong with gaining wealth. There is nothing wrong with becoming rich. (unless you became rich through unscrupulous

means.) But hard work and diligent endeavor is rewarded with abundance. And that is how it should be. But the words of Jesus and the witness of scripture make it very clear that we have a responsibility which accompanies wealth.

The fool is one who thinks it is all about him or her. They are the only ones who count. True richness lies in understanding that Christ calls us to heal the sick, visit the elderly, feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the prisoner, take care of the widows, reach out to the homeless, protect battered women and children, respect the rights of others, care for the needy, provide justice to the downtrodden, love the orphan, care for the stranger in the land...

And if God has blessed you with an abundant crop... or a good paycheck..... or a good return on your annuity.... Or a stock split.... Or the inheritance of your share of the family estate... and yes... even the winning of the lottery.....

Do not forget that you will never be truly rich until you have responded to the words of Jesus when he said... *“In as much as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.”* Only a fool would ignore this truth. Amen

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