

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Parable of the Rich Fool”

Rev. David K. Groth

July 31, 2022

Luke 12:13-21

American children make up 3.7 % of the children on the planet yet have 47 % of all the toys and children’s books. Ask them to clean up their rooms, and with all those toys and books on the floor, they are simply overwhelmed, which often leads to an outburst of tears. They don’t know what to do with it all.

It’s not just children. The LA Times reported the average American house has 300,000 items in it. On average we lose about 153 days of our lives searching for misplaced items.

32 % of Americans with a two-car garage can only park one vehicle within, for all the stuff piled high on the other side. In 25% of all two car garages, there’s no room for any vehicles (LA Times, March 21, 2014).

It seems we have a problem with stuff. Nothing new about that. In our text, Luke tells us Jesus is teaching a crowd of thousands (12:1). Seemingly out of nowhere, someone from the crowd interrupts Jesus and shouts, “Hey, Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!” Who is this guy? And I wonder: is his brother standing right there next to him? Did the crowd laugh at his impudence? Luke doesn’t tell us, but we know Jesus does not take the bait. He’s not interested in being the mediator between two brothers fighting over stuff. Instead, He says to all of them (and us), “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Then He tells a little parable. It goes like this.

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully.” Notice, it’s not the rich man who is producing plentifully. It’s the land. Sun, soil, seed and rain all join together to do their thing, the thing God designed them to do. The result is a bountiful harvest. God has blessed him with more yield than he can possibly manage. “What shall I do?” he asks. “I’ve got it! I’ll build bigger barns, and then I’ll be set for life. I’ll sit back and eat, drink and be merry!”

Notice, he’s not breaking any laws. He’s no criminal. He hasn’t stolen anything or mistreated anyone. We wouldn’t look on this man as a bad man. We may even assume him a wise man, favored by God because he has all this success and wealth.

So, if he’s not a criminal, what is he? He’s a fool, God says. Why? First this: he lives completely for himself. He talks to himself, plans for himself, congratulates himself. In the Greek, he uses the words *I* and *my* twelve times in just three sentences. It’s all about him. He has no concern about returning to God a portion of the generosity he’s received. No concern about helping the greater world in need. He’s just going to wallow in his wealth.

He’s also a fool because he’s short sighted. He assumes he will have many years to enjoy his wealth. The quote, already well known in Jesus’ day, was “Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.” But the rich man intentionally leaves off that last part about dying. He plans to just eat, drink and be merry, period. None of that dying stuff! He doesn’t even want to think about that. Trouble is, that very night God would require his soul. Then what will become of all his stuff? Our Old Testament lesson says like it or not, it will all go to someone else, and who knows whether he’ll be a wise man or another fool. But more importantly, what will become of the rich man when he dies? Job 20 says, “The joy of the godless lasts but a moment” (v. 5). And in Matthew 19 Jesus says it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to squeeze into heaven (v. 23-26). Then Jesus gives us the moral of the story . . . more like an open threat. “This is how it will go for anyone who lays up treasure for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Wish He hadn’t said that. It was a fine story until that last verse came along. It’s the phrase “rich toward God”; that’s the rub. Not one of us can deny that God has been rich toward us; but have we been rich toward God? I’m sure each of us gives back something but have we been rich in our giving?

This is one of those prickly texts that can be difficult to preach. What to do with it? I remember one of my professors saying your job is first to remind the people in the pews that these are not just some crazy ideas that you came up with on my own; these are the words of Jesus. So, you hold out the biblical text in front of you as a shield and you peer around it, and you say “this isn’t me talking, folks. This is Jesus. And yes, this is a hard lesson, but see Him about it; I just work here.”

Jesus is again talking about money and greed and stuff and generosity, sensitive topics to us all. This rich fool has filled his new barn to the brim. But his soul, just like his barn, is also full, full of money and stuff and greed and insatiability and self-indulgent plans. In other words, there is no room in his soul for God. God has been crowded out.

It’s not that money and goods are inherently bad. It’s what they do to us. One of the dangers of having lots of money and stuff is that you become quite satisfied with the kinds of happiness they can give and thus forget that you are at every

moment totally dependent on God. If you've already saved up enough dough to last a couple of lifetimes, then it can be hard to pray to God for daily bread.

In the Large Catechism, Luther says wealth is the most common idol on earth. The one who has it feels secure as if already in Paradise. The one who doesn't, feels despondent, as if God doesn't exist (LC 1, 7-8). Money is just as easily an idol for the rich as for the poor.

So what are we to do about that? Whether we have lots of wealth or little, we need to be rich toward God. His words, remember? When we give money back to God, there is a sense in which we are tearing down the idols of wealth and material goods. God teaches us to give back to Him richly, not because He needs it, but because we do. A tithe, a generous percentage of whatever we receive from Him: it's our last defense against having money as an idol. A tithe says to the idols of money and material abundance, you're not going to have all of me. You got some of me, but you're not going to have all of me. With this giving, I draw the line.

I'm reading a wonderful novel right now entitled, "The Lincoln Highway" by Amor Towles. In one chapter, an older man pulls out an officer's watch that his great grandfather wore in WW 1. It had a black dial with white numerals, so that it wouldn't attract the attention of enemy snipers. It had been passed down through the generations and now the older man is giving it to Billy, a 6 year old boy. Billy tries to hand it back, saying it's far too precious to be given away. But the man says, "It's not a watch that's too precious to be given away. It's a watch that's too precious for keeping. It was handed down from my grandfather to my uncle, who handed it down to me. Now I am handing it down to you. And one day – many years from now – you can hand it down to someone else." When we give things away like that, we're only hastening the inevitable, and directing it to where **we** want it to go, rather than abdicating that responsibility to probate court or others, who may be wise or fools.

So, first, God has been rich toward us. Jesus says we need to be rich toward God.

Second, don't ever set your confidence and trust in your wealth. Keep reminding yourself it's yours to use only temporarily. When you stay in a nice hotel room, you don't dare presume to take possession of it, as if it's all yours for the duration of life. It still belongs to the hotel. You're there for a night or two.

So also with your wealth. We use our wealth for this life and try to use it wisely. But we also know it doesn't really belong to us. It came from God and belongs to God. We get to use it for a time, and a short time at that.

Many of you are probably familiar with Marie Kondo and her system of getting rid of stuff and de-cluttering our lives. She teaches people to take objects in hand and ask if they bring a spark of joy. If it doesn't bring you a spark of joy, get rid of it. It's a helpful approach in many ways. But you know, I've been around a lot of dying people, and one thing I've noticed is that as people get closer to death, very few things give them any sparks of joy. They could care less. It's just inert, meaningless stuff. That's why it's so important to find our joy elsewhere, namely in Jesus Christ.

Remember that guy who shouted to Jesus from the crowd, "Hey teacher! Tell my brother to give me my stuff." He wanted Jesus to serve as mediator between he and his brother. Jesus is a mediator, but not the kind the man was looking for. Paul tells us "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). To mediate between holy God and sinful man, Jesus bore the burden of justice in His own flesh, giving Himself as the ransom price for all. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). He has freed us from being slaves to money and abundance. He has freed us from serving those false idols or any other. He says to us, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). If you have Christ, all you need will be added, given, kept for you, where neither moth nor rust destroy, where thieves do not break in and steal. Not even death can separate you from the true treasure: the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

With this parable, the Lord wants us to know that while money is important for our day-to-day life, it is powerless when it comes to eternity. With eternity in mind, there is only one thing needed: Jesus Christ as your Redeemer, your Rescuer from sin and death.

Though we have not been rich toward God, He has been rich toward us. For we who withhold our generosity from God, God has held nothing back, not even His Son. For we who can hoard life and love and stuff, Jesus gave it all, pouring it out on the cross. Why? He doesn't covet your money or your goods. (He can make more.) He covets you.

Marie Kondo says keep those things that give you a spark of joy. If you think about it, that doesn't say much for even the good and precious stuff, does it? A spark. A lousy little spark. If a spark is anything, it's small, and it's fleeting, short-lived. It doesn't endure. You cannot hold on to a spark. Don't we want more than a fleeting spark of joy? Didn't Jesus die to give us more than a lousy little spark of joy? Didn't He have something in mind like an unending blaze of joyous light in His presence? Revelation 24, "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." Thanks be to God.