

Series: The Words of Jesus
Today: Words on Wealth and Possessions (Part I)
Text: Luke 12:13-21

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, October 19, 2008
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Let me preface what I feel called to say this morning by telling you that our topic for the next two weeks was chosen months before we knew the world economy would be going through the crisis we have witnessed in the last month. Some might think that I had changed my topic to fit the circumstances of our time, but you would be wrong. Long before banks failed and the stock markets tumbled, we chose these words of Jesus because we know that Jesus had a lot to say about money and our economic well-being before there were banks and before there was a stock market. So, in a time of economic turmoil, the words of Jesus may give us some perspective on what he felt was really important when it comes to money.

All week long the topic of conversation everywhere I turned was the economy. I have been hearing stories about the impact on the personal lives of our members of the economic crisis in which we currently find ourselves. Nearly everyone who invested money in the stock market has been hurt, and that includes your pastor and his wife. However, I knew things were bad when a mother told me of the note her seven-year-old son had left for the tooth fairy.

About three weeks ago one of his teeth fell out. He took it and put it under his pillow, expecting something in return. When he woke up the next morning, the Tooth Fairy had brought him a dollar. Two weeks ago, another tooth fell out. He did the same with it and the same thing happened; a dollar under his pillow. Last week, a third tooth dropped

out and the boy wrote this note and put it under his pillow. It read: *“Dear Tooth Fairy: My parents are talking about the bad economy, I wonder if you could give me \$2 for my tooth, because we could really use more money.”*

The economic crisis has forced small business owners to become more creative, too. Perhaps you heard about the three store owners who shared adjacent storefronts in the same building. Times were tough. In hopes of picking up sales, the owner of the shop at one end of the building put a sign over his front entrance that said, GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE!!! At the other end of the building, another owner responded with his own sign: PRICES SLASHED! The owner of the store in the middle knew he had to act fast or he'd lose business. After careful consideration, he hung a larger sign over his front door that read, MAIN ENTRANCE.

We believe that the words of Jesus may help us to find some perspective for the turmoil we have been going through these past weeks. We know that money is not a foreign subject in the Bible. It is mentioned over 800 times in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. And it was surely not a foreign subject to Jesus who speaks on money more times in the New Testament than he speaks on prayer. So what did Jesus say, and what was the context of him saying it?

In our scripture this morning, Jesus is in the midst of teaching a lesson to thousands of people when two brothers approached him. Their question about dividing inheritance comes to Jesus in his role as a rabbi. It was not unusual for people to take their unsettled disputes to a respected Rabbi. However, the Law was rather clear. The division of wealth between brothers was two thirds to the older brother and one third to the younger

brother. There should have been no need to bring a Rabbi into the picture, but Jesus used the situation to teach his followers a healthy attitude toward money and possessions.

We are going to look at his response both this week and next. This week Jesus speaks to those who have an abundance of possessions, and next week he speaks to those who have little in the way of material goods.

The parable Jesus tells is about a man who is blessed with abundance, and the message is clear. 1) It is a message about our abundance. 2) It is a message about our attitudes toward our abundance; and 3) it is a message abundance and eternal life.

Message of Abundance

In the midst of economic crisis when many of us have lost thousands of dollars to the roller coaster ride in the stock market, the tendency is to focus on what we have lost and not what we have. When our bank accounts are dropping anywhere from 10-50% of what we had invested, it is natural to focus on the glass being half empty instead of half full. We are like the man in the parable. We have built bigger and better barns in which to store our wealth, and they have come crashing down around our ears.

When investment value drops as fast as it has in these last weeks, the tendency is to move to an attitude of scarcity. We want to hang on to what we have because we are afraid we won't have enough, instead of believing that we are still among the blessed of the world simply by our address in the USA. However, the truth is that most of the world would be satisfied with what we have lost, yet alone what we have left.

In his book, Jesus Wants to Save Christians, Rob Bell offers some startling statistics about America's affluence. [Source: Rob Bell, Jesus Wants to Save Christians (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 122-123]:

- America controls nearly 20 percent of the world's wealth. There are around six billion people in the world, and there are roughly three hundred million people in the U.S. That makes America less than 5 percent of the world's population. And this 5 percent owns a fifth of the world's wealth.
- Nearly one billion people in the world live on less than one American dollar a day.
- Another 2.5 billion people in the world live on less than two American dollars a day.
- Forty percent of people in the world lack basic sanitation, while forty-nine million diapers are used and thrown away in America every day.
- Every seven seconds, somewhere in the world a child under age five dies of hunger, while Americans throw away 14 percent of the food we purchase.
- Nearly one third of the people in the world have no electricity.
- Nearly one billion people in the world cannot read or sign their name.
- Nearly one hundred million children are denied basic education.
- Most of the people in the world do not own a car. One third of American families own three cars.
- Americans spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half of the world does on all goods. [Source: Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 122-123

Friends, no matter how much you and I may have lost in the last few weeks, we are still among the richest and the most richly blessed people in the world.

Message about Attitude

Because we are the most richly blessed people in the world, our attitude about what we do have is a deeply spiritual issue. We have to decide who owns what we have. Does it belong to God and we are only the caretakers? Or does it belong to us to be used for our own happiness. This is what the man in the parable could not understand. Oh, he understood that he had been given abundance beyond his wildest expectations, but he did not understand that what he had been given was a blessing from God.

Mosaic Law suggested that if your barns were full, you should leave what you have not harvested in the fields so that the poor could come and glean the crops so they might have food to eat. However, in the mind of the man in the parable, he believed that what he had was his. His solution to having too much was to build bigger and better barns, but

the principle of the Mosaic Law was this: when God gives a blessing, it is never to be hoarded for our own. We are only the stewards of what we have been given, and it is God's intention that we share what we have.

When Michigan residents Christine Bouwkamp and Kyle Kramer got married in the spring of 2007, they understood the principle of this kind of stewardship. They held a wedding reception that was anything but traditional. Instead of hosting a formal dinner, they held a simple reception at their church where guests were invited to help distribute food to people in need.

In the weeks leading up to their wedding, Christine and Kyle had decided they wanted to begin their marriage with an act of service to Christ. With that goal in mind, they figured out how much money they would have spent on a more extravagant reception and instead used that money to purchase five thousand pounds of food for those in need. The week of the wedding, the couple spread the word that a truck with free food would be at the church where they were married. Immediately after they exchanged their vows, Bouwkamp and Kramer put on aprons marked "Bride" and "Groom" and joined their wedding guests in distributing food to 100 neighborhood families.

When asked about the charitable act, the happy couple simply said they wanted to "Bless God for blessing us with each other." [source: Anne Cetas, "Serving Together," Our Daily Bread (June 2008)]

We are blessed, and we are to use what God has given us to be a blessing to others.

Message about Eternity

Finally, the parable is about eternity. It has been hard to think about the last four weeks as a deeply spiritual issue, hasn't it? When we have watched the fabric of our

economy being torn asunder and our personal futures being placed in doubt, it is hard to think about our response to the losses we have seen as a test of our spiritual lives.

However, when the barns we have built to insure the lifestyle we want have collapsed, many of us have responded with anger and fear. It has been a test of who we really believe is in control of our world.

Here is a newsflash: In the words of the parable, *“Fool, this very night your soul will be demanded of you.”* The newsflash: One day you and I are going to die. How will we be remembered? What will people say about us and how we faced the crises of today? Will we be remembered as angry and fearful, or will we be remembered as steady and faithful?

In a commencement address to Stanford University, Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple and Pixar, told the graduates: *“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.”*

[Source: Stanford University Commencement Address (June 2005)]

William Barclay illustrates the point this way: *“There is a story of a conversation between an ambitious young man and an older man. The younger man said, ‘I will learn my trade.’ The older man responded, ‘And then?’ ‘I will set up a business.’ ‘And then?’ ‘I will make my fortune.’ ‘And then?’ ‘I suppose that I shall grow old and retire and live on my money.’ ‘And then?’ ‘Well, I suppose that some day I will die.’ ‘And then?’”*

The young man had no other answer. He understood the point of the questioning.

We must live each day as if it were our last - for one day it may well be.

Do we want to spend eternity fearful and angry, or do we want to spend it receiving and sharing the love of God? Do we want to be remembered for all the stuff we have accumulated and the bigger and better barns we build to store it in, or is there something more lasting we can commit ourselves to which will leave a legacy to those we love?

The choice is in our hands, friends. Choose wisely.