

“Generosity and Philosophy”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 15, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 12: 13-21

The Parable of the Rich Fool

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

¹⁵And 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.”

¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

²⁰But 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?’

²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

At the funeral of the fabulously wealthy Aristotle Onassis,
one of the mourners turned to another and said,
“I wonder how much Mr. Onassis left?”
And the friend replied, *“Everything. He left everything.”*

Let's have a heart-to-heart for a while in this safe and sacred place.

Let's prayerfully consider where we are on the greed-to-generosity spectrum.

God invites us to grow in our practice of generosity.

God invites us to cultivate a culture of generosity

in our church and community, in our families and relationships.

God invites us to invest our money and resources, ourselves and our souls

in that which has meaning, makes a difference, & leaves a legacy.

Greed, however, sneaks up on us as a good thing, or at least as a necessary thing.

In the comic strip *The Wizard of Id*, the priest asks the king:

"Sire, of all the major sins, which do you consider to be number one?"

"Well, said the king, "they are all bad, but I like greed the best."

Greed, says the Apostle Paul, is idolatrous.

Paul wrote to the Colossians, saying: *"Put to death, therefore,*

whatever in you is earthly, (including) greed (which is idolatry)."

When "someone in the crowd said to Jesus,

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Jesus said to him,

"Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

You see, Jesus will not allow himself to be brought in the middle

to settle petty squabbles.

He probably doesn't even care about touchdowns

or homeruns or, heaven forbid, the Daytona 500.

Then Jesus said, *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;
for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”*

Be on your guard.

Be aware! *“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”*

Yesterday I learned from Dr. Stan Saunders,

Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary,

that one of the topics Jesus spoke about the most was wakefulness.

Be awake. Be aware. Be cognizant. Take care! Be on your guard!

Be spiritually and intellectually prepared for the important decisions in life.

In today’s vernacular, Jesus wants us to be “woke.”

“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

We have witnessed extremes on the spectrum of greed-to-generosity.

Some of us may have had the opportunity

to see the exhibition of King Tutankham’s treasures.

From 1324 BCE until 1922 AD, King Tut’s body and wealth

was in the dark in an airless chamber.

For over 30 centuries the body of the Egyptian king

was sealed in a large tomb alongside his riches.

When his tomb was discovered and opened,

King Tutankhamen’s body had decomposed.

Only the gold and alabaster kept their substance and form.

They glitter and please the human eye as well as ever.

It was the objects and not the man that rose again.

Is this not a message for us?

What do you think is the Easter message here?

What is to be our legacy?

“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

What legacy, if not in things, then,

does Christ envision for the whole people of God?

What gifts do you carry in your soul?

What do you think?

Amazing how those two questions – what we bear and how we think –
go hand in hand.

A driver weaves his or her car dangerously in and around rush hour traffic

as if to express that rules are made for other people, so you say aloud,

“Just because you think you can doesn’t mean you should.”

Or, maybe, over the steering wheel, you choose to use your bowling words.

Another example are the members and friends who drove – safely, I’m sure –

here to church to bring bags & boxes of supplies for our neighbors in need

in Puerto Rico and for the food pantry at

Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry.

All around us in our city streets are vivid examples

of the spiritual, life-giving connection

between what we think and how we behave.

Consider that what we reason, what we think, what we philosophize

had its genesis in theory
then evolved to become a way of life, of being, of relating.
We call this discipline Philosophy.
Philosophically speaking,
it matters that we have a solid grasp
of the ultimate nature of existence, reality, knowledge
and goodness, as discoverable by human reasoning.[1]

Rarely do we give philosophy as a discipline the credit its due.

Sometimes we perceive that philosophy carries the sense
of unproductive or frivolous musings.

Ask a college student her major; if she says, "Philosophy,"
the next thought that comes to mind is, "Good luck getting a job."

[And then you hope you didn't use your outside voice.]

Yet learning how to think, to reason, is intimately interrelated
with how to live a meaningful life,
especially how to live together, in community.

Over the centuries the discipline of philosophy
has produced some of the most important original thought,
and its contribution to politics, sociology, mathematics,
science and literature has been inestimable.

Especially the discipline's contribution to religion and spirituality.

Plato and Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, David Hume
and Immanuel Kant, Kierkegaard, Catherine of Siena and Paul Tillich
troubled and challenged, inspired and engaged us to delve into

the meaning of life and how we commune together
on this blue planet spinning in the sky.

Philosophy deals with ethics, with moral choices we make in community.

What we think impacts our actions, and vice versa.

Our everyday practices and habits have the power to change our minds.

We have the power to consider then choose

whether we will be practitioners of generosity or greed

– or somewhere along the wide spectrum.

What and how we think about generosity makes all the difference.

What do you think?

What gifts do you carry in your soul?

Amazing how those two questions go hand in hand.

One soul who contemplated his place on the greed-to-generosity spectrum

was Clarence Jordan.

He was a farmer and a scholar.

Clarence Jordan loved to read the New Testament in Greek.

His biblical studies of the teachings of Jesus so impacted his personal life

that he and his wife Florence sold all they had

and moved to Americus, Georgia in 1942.

There they began to farm and grow pecans.

In Americus, not only did they farm the land,

they started an intentional Christian, interracial farming cooperative

called Koinonia Farm, which in Greek means fellowship or community.

They sought to live into and out of the Kingdom of God,

and their three goals were: peace, brotherhood, and sharing.

Now, Koinonia Farm attracted attention.

Some of the attention was positive, and some was negative.

It really mattered how one viewed people from different races

and backgrounds deciding to celebrate diversity and unity.

I know that for years my family ordered by mail,

pecans and pecan products from Koinonia.

When asked, my parents explained that it was to support the goal, the effort,

the commitment of the cooperative....and because the nuts tasted great.

As the word spread about Koinonia Farm,

a 30-year-old millionaire in Alabama

named Millard Fuller and his wife and children visited there.

The Fullers were increasingly unhappy with the way money ran their lives

rather than the other way around.

After much prayer, soul searching and discernment,

the Fullers sold everything they had.

They felt called to help build homes for the homeless

– no more shacks! they vowed -- and thus began a housing movement

that evolved into Habitat for Humanity International.

Meanwhile Clarence Jordan translated the Gospels and Epistles from the Greek

into 20th century language, with a definite Southern accent, or flavor.

He called his translation “The Cotton Patch Gospels.”

Instead of traveling across Judea and to Jerusalem,

Clarence Jordan placed Jesus and his followers

in the byways and highways of Georgia.

He called the Kingdom of God the God Movement.

He translated today's Gospel lesson this way:

“A certain rich fellow’s farm produced well. And he held a meeting with himself and he said, ‘What shall I do? I don’t have room enough to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my old barns and build some bigger ones in which I’ll store all my wheat and produce. And I will say to myself, ‘Self, you’ve got enough stuff stashed away to do you a long time. Recline, dine, wine, and shine!’ But God said to him, ‘You nitwit, at this very moment your goods are putting the screws on your soul. All these things you’ve grubbed for, to whom shall they really belong?’ That’s the way it is with a man who piles up stuff for himself without giving God a thought.”

Clarence Jordan’s translation may be truer to the original Greek text than the New Revised Standard Version

we heard read earlier as the gospel today.

The Bible says: *“This very night your life is being demanded of you.”*

Yet a closer translation is: *“They have demanded your life.”*

And who is “they”?

His “things” — his “stuff” — his possessions.

He no longer owned his possessions; they owned him.

Or, in Jordan’s words, *“Your goods are putting the screws on your soul.”*

Somewhere deep inside,

we all know that truth and the need to heed Jesus’ warning:

Take care! Beware! Everything we own also owns a little bit of us!

Possessions can possess us (and obsess us), if we let them.

The rich farmer made the mistake of thinking

that he really possessed his great wealth,

although Jesus said that the reality was that it possessed him.

Movie magnate Sam Goldwyn, on being told that he couldn’t take it with him,

replied, *“Well then, I just won’t go.”*

However, you and I are not quite sure that is an option.

We can’t take it with us, nor can we refuse to go when it is our time;

nor can we avoid accounting for our lives,

and how we lived them,

and our possessions and how we used them,

when we stand before our God.[2]

The farmer in Jesus’ parable had the blessed problem of a bumper crop,

of an unexpected abundance, and when he discovers it

the only soul he consults is his own.

He asks himself, "What should I do?"

Surprise, surprise, the same source provides an answer:

keep the surplus for the self-centered Trinity of Me, Myself, & I.

Now, let us be fair:

there is no indication that the farmer in the parable
earned his goods in an unjust way or with unfair practices.

The challenge before him – and us -- is not

in how he grew extra crops on his land;
it's his lack of concern for those in need in his midst.

Ancient wisdom teaches that wealth must be shared with those in need

because the resources of the land and the community are limited.

Philosophy and wisdom as old as time teaches that if goods are limited,

one person's hoarding sets in motion
a relational dynamic that takes away from others.

This parable is about the misuse of goods and property,

the hoarding of wealth and resources,
the idolatrous worship of things and possessions.

We call this greed.

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy that the *"love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."*

The Good News is that when it comes to human greed, God intervenes.

God sees where folks are on the spectrum, and then gets busy.

God cares about those in need in our midst,

and has the audacity to expect us to care, as well.

As Jesus says in the parable,

God speaks to the content, happy farmer.

“You fool! This night your soul is required of you,

and all these extra goods and grains you have stored,

whose will they be?”

Joseph Parry got the message.

In 1879, Joseph Parry penned these words:

“Bigger barns are what I need!”

So a rich man said one day.

“From my worries I'll be free,

when my wealth is stored away.”

“Fool!” God said, “Today you'll die!

Will your wealth mean anything?

All life's blessings really lie –

in my life that wealth can't bring.”

“Bigger barns are what we need,

for our money, gadgets, more!”

Lord, we're tempted to believe

having wealth we'll be secure!

Somewhere children cry for food,

or to have a doctor's care.

Can our bigger barns be good

when poor neighbors know despair?

*God of love we long to know,
what will make us truly blest.
Jesus taught us long ago,
wealth won't give us peace or rest.
You are our security!
Safe in you we serve O Lord.
May we find we're rich indeed,
when we're sharing with the poor.*

What do you think?

What gifts do you carry in your soul?

Amazing how those two questions go hand in hand.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Penguin English Dictionary

[2] The Very Reverend Steve Lipscomb, Dean, Grace Episcopal Church, Topeka, Kansas.