

“Investing in God’s Kingdom”

Luke 12:13-21

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Arising out of Jesus’ story of the rich fool, I am starting my sermon today with that worn out statement: “I’ve got good news and bad news.” First, the bad news: Responding to the man who asked for a share of an inheritance that was rightfully his, Jesus first speaks a prophetic word – “Take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” I can imagine Jesus warning us today, saying something like this: “Beware, the lure of consumerism in America is so seductive. You know that you can’t buy your way to happiness.” Jesus reminds us that the deep hungers of the human condition cannot be satisfied with more things. I can hear Jesus saying, “What I am saying to you is not new. You have heard me speak on this subject. I have taught it to you before, but you seem to forget!”

“Take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” That’s the bad news in today’s Gospel lesson. But then Jesus announces good news “for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” That is news – actually, it is good news – for the man who came to Jesus. It was no doubt also good news for many other people listening to Jesus, and it is good news for many of us now. I once saw a bumper sticker with the words: “Whoever has the most toys at the end wins!” Bemused, I thought to myself, “I hate that; and how absurd!” But then it struck me that we would not be amused if it did not resonate with at least some truth about what we invest in and the manner in which we invest as we make our way in the world.

You are what you drive, the commercials tell us. You are the styles you wear. You are the house you live in. You are what you eat and drink. You are the vacation you take. That is the bad news our society proclaims in magazines and on television. And Jesus has warned his hearers before not to lay up for themselves treasures on earth ...not to think that investing in more stocks and bonds, more property, and more valuable stuff will shape our identity ...will make us someone special ...someone to be looked up to ...someone “successful.”

“No!” I hear Jesus saying, and he continues: “Beware, the world is giving you bad news and leading you astray. You are more than what you eat or drink, or what you put on every day,

or what car you drive, or what huge bank balance you may be fortunate to have.” Against such bad news I hear Jesus proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus proclaims, “Your life does *not* consist in the abundance of possessions. You are *not* what you drive, wear, or buy. You are *not* just owner, buyer, possessor; you are yourself a treasure, God’s own treasure. You are mystery. You are God’s beloved. You are God’s joy. You are one in whom God delights.” Now to this story which Jesus told ...a story about a rich fool ...a story that invites us to invest in a fresh new way to live ...a story that invites us to invest in God’s Kingdom.

The story Jesus tells is about a wealthy farmer, who had more material wealth than he had need of, deciding to build larger barns to store even greater amounts of earthly assets. Jesus indicates that – probably for good reason – God was upset with the farmer and said in effect to him, “Tough luck, my dear fellow! Tonight your soul’s leaving your body for good! You know what I mean ...people will be reading your obituary this coming week and staring at your soulless body at J.C. Green’s Funeral Home!”

What a blow! Here comes the bad news again: Jesus is warning against the futility of hoarding stuff and accumulating bigger and better assets for the wrong reasons. He does so because he is aware that there is one person in the crowd who is too distracted by possessions to see and hear Jesus. Remember that Jesus is responding to the man who had just asked Jesus to hear his concern that one of his brothers was not sharing an inheritance. But remember, too, that Jesus is teaching this large crowd about God’s Kingdom ...about the reality of God’s love and presence in their lives – and this man completely misses the point because he is measuring his life in possessions. Jesus cautions him, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions!”

The point Jesus is trying to make in the story is that the rich foolish farmer invested his life in the wrong things instead of investing his life in the Kingdom of God. In so doing, the rich farmer was measuring the value of his life by what he possessed, or rather, what possessed him. Jesus wants his hearers to understand that the farmer may have become a man who is rich in material assets, but, sadly, a man who is poor towards God. Bishop Will Willimon comments: “He is rich only toward himself, not toward God. He talks only to himself. He lives for himself thinking that he is securing his life through his possessions and for this, the man that

we might call a prudent, productive business person Jesus calls a ‘fool.’”

We need to be clear about what Jesus is saying and what Jesus is not saying in this story of the rich farmer. I have mentioned in earlier sermons that Jesus does *not* say here, or in any other place in the New Testament, that it is wrong to be rich or to have lots of things. Wealth and possessions, in and of themselves, are neutral. There is nothing inherently evil about them. Nor does Jesus say here that it is wrong to plan for the future or save up for a rainy day. Jesus is also *not* saying that there is something wrong with wanting to enjoy life or to retire from our jobs. Jesus says that the problem here is how the rich farmer thinks. Jesus claims that God has a problem with self-centered thinking. Listen to the farmer: “What shall *I* do? *I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and build bigger ones ...*I* will store all *my* grain, and *I* will say to *my* soul, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry!’”

The farmer in this story considers his wealth to be entirely of his own making, and it is his to do with as he chooses. There is no sense of accountability to anyone else, not even God. Apparently, he feels no responsibility for those who might not have enough – his neighbors, and possibly even his loved ones. There seems to be a selfish greed and a narrow concern for his own pleasure. Either he forgets that the abundant harvest was a gift from God, or he fails to recognize the harvest as a gift or acknowledge God as the Giver. He shows no sense of gratitude whatsoever. It seems that he has forgotten about two things: that he may die suddenly, and that the IRS will be taking its share of the harvest!

Do you know how you would find out most about what investment I have in God’s kingdom? By examining my check book, if I would let you ...but I won’t because I would not have the nerve to ask to examine yours! A check book – a contemporary version of the barn in Jesus’ story – is possibly the best place for Jesus to find out what matters most to people like ourselves. Perhaps some of us are thinking, “Well, I don’t have anything to be concerned about ...in fact, I think I am let off the hook, Jesus, because I don’t have the kind of extravagant wealth described in your story of the rich farmer. So I don’t think you are directing this at me.” Not true. You see we all have resources – some smaller, some larger than others – but let’s face it in our own way, at our own level, we build barns ...and then bigger barns!

Jesus doesn’t get into how big your barn or my barn should be in this story or in other places in the New Testament. It would have been a lot easier if he had. Then we would have a

nice little fixed program we could all plug into, and feel good about the acceptable standard “barn” of our life. But it isn’t that simple. Jesus sidesteps the particulars and goes to the heart, “If you wish to live, live a life rich toward God.” The best investment, the true investment, the wise investment in life, is not in our labor for bread, shelter and clothes – the wise investment is in building honest, loving relationships with one another. These are the riches of God. Do you know, or have you known, people who live lives that reflect these riches of God? Do you know people who are investing their lives richly in God’s Kingdom?

I came across a moving personal interaction between a preacher and his dying mother in a sermon he had written on this same text. “During the last months before my mother’s death,” he said, “one of the conversations I always had with her began with my saying, ‘I want to tell you about your investments.’ Certainly we had spent time talking about where the money supporting her was coming from, but the focus of our conversation now was upon her investments in God’s kingdom and in her loved ones. I told her what was happening with her grandchildren and with other people she had loved and invested herself in, how her investment in them was being played out in their lives. As her own life diminished she was made aware that her most important investments – in God’s Kingdom and in those whom she loved – were doing pretty well.”

So, in the midst of harsh words today and bad news, the Gospel invitation is to hear that the place to invest is in a life rich toward God. And that means responding to the good news that Jesus is Savior and Lord. It means making a deep and abiding commitment to live for Jesus Christ and to serve God’s Kingdom. There’s no nice contract, no nice arrangement – just a simple invitation to live richly toward God ...to invest fully in God’s Kingdom. Living without bigger and better barns is living as a steward, freely, without fear, knowing that life is accountability to God and to others. Living richly toward God is to be constantly surrounded by, surprised by, and satisfied with God’s Kingdom. It takes a lifetime of investment.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.