

Year C
Proper 13
Colossians 3:10-11
Luke 12:13-21

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

Last Sunday, among other things, we heard Jesus teaching his disciples to pray—and to pray only for their daily needs. This Sunday Paul also talks about this, and Jesus points out the folly of greed. Notice Jesus’s story of the Rich Fool is not about the folly of wealth, but about making an idol out of your wealth. Let’s take a look.

Jesus tells the parable of the wealthy man who wants to pull down the barns that he has in order to build even larger barns that will hold an even greater harvest. This, in itself is not the problem, because in Jesus’s time, just as in ours, money was a tool. Money can do tremendous good. Money supports food pantries to feed the hungry; money funds research to rid us of diseases; money helps preserve our history, helps to support art, and money educates people. And as we saw earlier this summer, Jesus relied on the money in the various communities he traveled around to support himself and his disciples in their preaching. Remember, too, that Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, ultimately buries Jesus in his own, brand-new tomb. So this other rich man’s foolishness is not that he is rich, but that he believes that his *soul* is fine because he’s rich. “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

This man is focused on accumulating more, not so that he can be secure, but in order to indulge himself. Jesus says “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” The word greed in Greek translates literally as “much-having,” possessing a lot of something, but still wanting more—money, books, land, teacups, influence. It could be greed for anything, because in always wanting more, there will never be enough. “Much-having” can drive people to do all kinds of things that they wouldn’t otherwise do. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians this morning, says that greed, this “much having” is a form of idolatry. Remember, **not** having idols is one of the ten commandments. God is very specific about our having **no** other Gods. One of the reasons why is because when we are focused on the “much having,” we can forget why we want more, and idolize the thing for its own sake. Then we deceive ourselves into thinking that more of the idolized thing will satisfy our innermost longings, when only God can really do that. Greed can lead us to take advantage of others, to oppress others, and then to make excuses for doing this: self-deception again.

In a way, the Rich Fool in the parable is distracted in the same way that Martha was distracted. Remember, in the story about Mary and Martha, Jesus said that Martha was “worried and distracted by many things.” Instead of focusing on Jesus and his teaching, she was focusing on her own work, and the fact that Mary wasn’t helping her. Similarly, the rich man, instead of focusing on what God might want him to be doing with his wealth, is focusing on accumulating *more*, and enjoying himself. His focus is all

wrong. His focus should be on God. Jesus says “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

“Rich toward God” is an interesting turn of phrase. What could it look like to be “rich toward God”? Actually, it seems like Jesus has been giving us examples of this in Luke’s gospel. We see the Samaritan taking the time and spending his money to help a person who might be an enemy. We see Mary focused on Jesus and his teachings. In the verses immediately after this parable, Jesus says giving alms—essentially giving to charity—is what we should be doing.

But our culture makes it hard to be rich toward God, because our culture values exactly the opposite of that. American culture says we should accumulate money and power, and *consume*. So just in being Americans, it’s so easy to lose our focus on God. But even in the face of this, we can **still** see people being rich toward God all the time. For instance, someone taking the time to make a meal for a sick friend. Nurses taking it in turns to hold the hand of a dying patient, so that she won’t die alone. People serving their church by being on the vestry. Giving a box of granola bars and a bottle of water to a man begging near the grocery store. Volunteering at the food pantry. Setting the altar and caring for its paraments. Walking a sick friend’s dogs. It’s not always the earth-shaking acts that make us rich toward God. It’s more about the intentional, daily focus on what God wants us to be doing. Setting, and re-setting, and re-setting again our focus on God. Jesus asks us to trust in God’s grace and mercy. So what *does* it look like when YOU are “rich toward God”?

Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis
July 31, 2022