

## ***Rich Toward God***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 4, 2019

Text: Luke 12:13-21

As most of you know, this morning is my first Sunday in the pulpit after being off for four weeks' vacation. Let me begin by saying how grateful I am for the time off which the church made possible but, be assured, I missed you all and am very glad to be back. As you might expect, before leaving I put a lot of effort into getting things in order both for my time off and for what would be happening when I returned in August. Not surprisingly, I spent a lot of time planning for worship both while I was away and when I returned. But, as we all know, once you go out the door, those efforts slide into the background as vacation mode sets in.

I'm grateful that such was the case for me, but I confess to a jarring re-entry this past week when I began to plan for today's worship and sermon. When I looked at my notes for this Sunday, and I reread the text, I was shocked to realize I had spent much of my time off in July reflecting on, praying about, living through what it means to be expecting one thing to happen in your life and then being brought up short by an entirely different reality. I suddenly had way more in common with "the barns guy," as I tend to think of the man in today's parable, than I had ever had before. Who knew?

The story is a simple one, at least on the surface. The set-up for the parable is that “someone in the crowd” asks Jesus to “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” After stating he had no intention of stepping in as an arbiter in such a situation, Jesus goes on to warn the crowd about the insidious nature of greed and illustrates the warning with a parable. A rich man found himself with an abundance of crops and wealth after a particularly good year of business. So, realizing that this was his chance to have more than enough wealth to be comfortable for the rest of his life, he orders his storehouses – his barns – to be torn down and rebuilt as much bigger structures in order to accommodate his ever-increasing wealth. Sounds like a reasonable plan, we think. But God has other plans, reminding the man that life is short and his will end that very night before he can enjoy his wealth as he had hoped to. God even asks the man, “and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Ouch! Jesus isn’t kidding around with this warning about the dangers of greed, of putting too much emphasis on money and “stuff” in life.

This story about “the barns guy” is a familiar one, and a theme common in literature over the centuries. Charles Dickens, for one, wrote often about the economic injustices of 19<sup>th</sup> century London, as typified in his beloved “Scrooge” character from *A Christmas Carol*. So too it was greed and jealousy that drove the wicked stepmother in Cinderella and the wicked queen in Snow

White. It was greed that put 101 Dalmatians in danger from the evil Cruella Deville. It's greed and an unquenchable desire for power that has empowered many a movie villain like Dr. No and Blowfeldt of the James Bond movies. Clearly the overt message from our culture is that unmitigated greed and the evils it brings with it are BAD – VERY BAD. In this it echoes the lesson Jesus embeds in the parable of the barns. But, how far under the surface has this message that greed is bad really penetrated? Or, reframing this in another way, how much like the barns guy are we really, making the accumulation of stuff in support of our own financial well-being more important than anything else?

Now, that is a much tougher question to think about, isn't it? After all, in our society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century USA the barns guy is doing exactly what his financial advisor told him to do! He's worked hard all his life and he's just trying to figure out the best way to enjoy the fruits of his own labor, we think. Why shouldn't he build bigger barns? Why shouldn't he put his efforts into storing up resources for many years so that he can, "relax, eat, drink and be merry?" By the way, did you know this famous phrase came from the Bible? Sounds like one of those Shakespeare quotes, doesn't it? But it's not. In fact, it's in the Bible in several places – Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians as well as right here in Luke to be precise. And it never appears in

a positive light, contrary to how it sounds when standing alone as it so often is when we encounter it. But, back to the barns guy.

What do we know about him? We know he is a good business man since he has accrued so much in an economic environment where poverty was the norm. We know he was a wise financial planner because he figures out all on his own that with his expanded wealth, he really needs to up his game when it comes to saving for the long haul. Hence the bigger barns. Okay. Fine. Good qualities for someone to have. Admirable even. Heck, if he was a member of the church with a track record like that we'd ask him to be a Trustee or head up the Stewardship Campaign. This guy is skilled in all the right ways!

But is he? That's the question Jesus is raising in this parable and it's the question God asks the man directly when confronting him about his own future. "You fool!" God says, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" But Jesus doesn't end the parable there. He continues: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. Now there is a sobering thought.

So, let's consider it a little deeper. Is Jesus saying that wealth, that providing well for yourself and your family, is a bad thing? Or he is saying something much more nuanced and

complex? For me, it's the latter. And it comes down to one little word. "But." Jesus says quite clearly that the problem is those who store up treasure for themselves BUT are not rich toward God. This would seem to say that it's not the wealth that matters so much as it is one's attitude toward God vis-à-vis wealth that is the real point here. But even this isn't going far enough. The real question is, what does it mean to be "rich toward God." What does that look like? How do you do it? How do you know that your way of being rich toward God is, in fact, acceptable to God? Now, this is where it gets tricky. This is also where this conversation converges back in with my experiences during vacation.

As one does on vacation, I was able to indulge in some of the things I really love to do during my time off and one of those is to immerse myself in a religious community or two. Yeah, I know, it's weird but I really do enjoy it. I'd like to tell you about two of them from this summer. My first experience was during our vacation to Enfield, NH when we toured the Enfield Shaker Museum. The Shakers, a Christian utopian community with roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, have always fascinated me. There is much to say on the topic of the Shakers but for today, I want to focus on their answer to the question of what it means to be rich toward God. For them, it was all summed up in the phrase which guided every aspect of their lives together – hearts to God, hands to work. The Shakers were among the most industrious, hard-working

people of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was because they believed that work itself was an act of worship. This is why their craftsmanship and creativity were second to none. Everything they did, every moment of every day, was intended as an act of being rich toward God. Were they financially successful? Yes, very. They owned thousands of acres of productive farmland as well as businesses they operated. Their downfall was not an economic one but grew from their unfortunate belief that celibacy was the only way to live as God's people, a belief which caused their numbers to dwindle too low to maintain the many business and farms they had established. Did they in fact build bigger barns when their success dictated they do so? Yes. We walked through one! But even this barn was seen only as a piece of their wider endeavor of being rich in what they saw as God's greatest gift to humankind – unconditional love. They lived this unconditional love every day – they would take in anyone, in any circumstance, no questions asked. Every person was treated with respect and was taught they were beloved of God. Love permeated every aspect of every day in the Shaker community as their commitment of being rich toward God defined their every waking moment.

My immersion experience continued during my annual sabbatical week at Wisdom House in Litchfield, CT. Founded by a Catholic religious order of nuns, the Daughters of Wisdom, only a few of the nuns remain at the House but it is as vibrant and alive

as ever. The mission of Wisdom House is, in fact, to be a place where people of all faiths can come and experience a myriad of different ways of being rich toward God. During my retreat week, my group included a few nuns resting after a year of work in the inner city schools of New York, a few spiritual directors, and folks from all walks of life who came to the retreat to reconnect with God in the midst of frantic lives. We came together literally to remember and live together what it means to be rich toward God every day. Let me be clear, this is not an inexpensive enterprise. The Daughters of Wisdom struggle with finances as much as any other order does today. Their retreat and workshop programs are not cheap to attend. I could only go because of the generosity of our church who picked up most of the cost for me through my professional development funds voted on each year. So again, access to financial resources is not a bad thing in and of itself. It's the place of importance the accumulation of personal financial resources holds in our lives where the problems come in.

Finally, I also had another experience while I was on vacation which connected directly to this parable, but in a completely sense. During my first week off, Peter and I learned that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, the bad kind. It was caught very early so the doctors are very optimistic, talking cure and not just remission. But they also didn't pull any punches. This is a serious diagnosis, the kind that makes you

think hard about phrases like, “this very night your life will be demanded of you.” Suddenly, those words hit us a little too close for comfort. Life suddenly seemed very fragile indeed. And for that, Peter and I have come to realize, we are deeply grateful.

We are deeply grateful to receive this invitation from God to reflect on what it is in life each day that really matters even as circumstances have forced us to pay attention to all those mundane issues like finances and powers of attorney and trust agreements and insurance in entirely new ways. Despite all that, four weeks into this new reality, Peter and I feel truly blessed for this chance to reflect individually, as a couple and as a family on just what it means to be rich toward God in every circumstance. Is it easy to do? Of course not. Would we rather be putting our energies toward building bigger barns for retirement somewhere down the road so that we can eat, drink and be merry? Maybe, on some days. But, most of the time we are too busy counting our blessings to do much else. Our focus is now on living each day enriched by God *because we are trying to live are rich toward God* as best as we are able. And guess what else we’ve figure out? If we can do it, anybody can. Even you. Amen.

[Preached with Peter’s specific permission.]