

Sermon for August 4, 2019

Rich Toward God

Luke 12:13-21

The Reverend Roger Pancost

It is pretty much a given that when a minister returns from vacation you are going to hear references to that vacation in the first sermon offered. Not wanting to break this hallowed tradition, I begin this sermon with a story from my family's most recent vacation.

For two weeks our family had the privilege of spending time in one of our favorite places; the Sleeping Bear National Lake Shore. During our time away we enjoyed swimming in Lake Michigan, riding our bikes, visiting with friends, and just relaxing.

In addition, we went on a home tour that serves as a fund-raiser for the local library. All of these homes were beautiful and were located either on a river, a lake or a pond.

There was one home that stunned everyone who toured it. It is an eight thousand square foot house sitting on 280 feet of Lake Michigan beach front. When entering this house, a volunteer directed us to visit the west wing first. As we walked through the kitchen another volunteer explained that in addition to the large refrigerator built into the wall, there are three refrigerated drawers throughout the massive kitchen. We joked about how difficult it must be to remember where you put your groceries. Upstairs in the west wing there are two "bunk rooms." I am certain that the room containing numerous twin-size beds is about the same square footage as our entire house.

We were then directed to visit the "man cave" in the basement, where there is a full-size pool table, bar, and T.V. viewing area. Upon returning up the stairs we were directed toward the north wing.

The north wing consists of a dining area that can easily seat 20 people, a living room with a massive field-stone fireplace, a master suite with panoramic views of Lake Michigan, and a bathroom clad in white marble.

I thought about this extremely large house this past week as I reflected on Jesus' encounter with a man who wanted Jesus to settle a financial dispute with a relative. You will recall that Jesus refuses to be the arbitrator of such a dispute, saying, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you? Take care! Be on

your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Jesus then does what he often does...he offers a story. This time it is a parable about a man who loves to accumulate wealth. When the man reaches a point where he no longer has enough storage room for his surplus, he says, "I will do this; I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grains and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, and be merry." (I guess no one told him about the importance of building a 'man cave'.)

New Testament scholar, Audrey West, invites us to note that the pronouns "I," "me," and "my" dominate Jesus' parable. She writes, "Here there is concern only for himself, not for his neighbors, for those who have no land to produce their own crops, for the alien, the widow, and the orphan at the margins of society, for any whose lives are at risk due to their limited access to resources. Throughout Luke's Gospel, as well as in the development of the church over the centuries, the act of giving to the poor remains a central element of the sanctified life. The man in the parable is so self-centered, however, that he cannot see beyond what he considers to be "his" harvest, "his" barns, and "his own" life." (Feasting on the Word, p. 312, Audrey West.)

Jesus' parable ends with the man looking forward to a life of self-indulgent leisure. And then God shows up, saying, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" In other words, "You can't take it with you."

New Testament professor Richard Carlson writes, "The man in the parable and people who emulate his pattern of life are fools for leading isolated, self-absorbed lives, because everything they have given themselves ends with death. Life is not had by the possessions one has. Life and possessions are a gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion, precisely for those who lack resources to provide for themselves." (Feasting on the Word, p. 315, Richard P. Carlson)

This parable invites us to reflect on where we put our focus. Do we focus on acquiring wealth for our own benefit? Or, do we focus on being rich toward God? According to Luke, being rich toward God involves using our resources for the benefit of those who are in need.

Like the man in the parable, there are some who have material wealth that they can share. These resources can be used to feed those who are hungry, house those who are homeless, and offer support to those who are oppressed.

Those with limited financial resources still have much to share. Every person has gifts and abilities that they can use to support other people. This can be done by volunteering with organization that help to uplift others, assisting a neighbor, or supporting a friend. Whatever skills we possess, we can use them to care for other people.

We also have the resource of time. Even if we are feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of life, we can find time to be present to others. Sadly, some individuals become so consumed by their desire to acquire wealth and prestige that they neglect spending time with even their family members. Like the individual in Jesus' parable they, may not discover the futility of this pursuit until it is too late.

I began this sermon by describing a large home on the shores of Lake Michigan. Please know that I am not condemning the owners of that home. I don't know these individuals, nor do I know how they share their wealth with others. They were clearly generous enough to offer their home as a way to raise money for the local library.

My sharing this illustration is actually about me. For you see, as I was touring this home I was reminded how easy it is to get caught up in the desire for possessions. There was a part of me that felt jealous as I walked through the beautiful rooms of that house. I couldn't help thinking about what it would like to enjoy such a magnificent home in such a beautiful location. I am quite certain that the other people touring that home were having similar feelings.

I was reminded that day how the allure of possessions can cause us to forget what is really important in life. Possessions may bring enjoyment for the moment, but it is our relationships with other people that really matter.

These relationships include not only our family members and friends, but other people who are in need. It is through our care of other people that we discover what it truly means to be rich...that is, rich towards God.

