

I learned a lesson early on in my life in the corporate world: Snags and around money are almost never actually about the money. And they are never *only* about the money. Not in life and certainly not in this parable.

You see, if this parable was just about hoarding material wealth, then we could be content just to say, “You can’t take it with you.” But that skims over a deep richness that becomes available only if we listen to the psalmist’s words and ponder these things, considering well God’s steadfast love.

There are dozens of proverbs from all over the world that warn against spending our lives on the collection of material possessions. The Germans say: “Gold goes through all doors except heaven’s gate.” The French say: “The richest man carries nothing away with him but a shroud.” In Italian, it’s “Our winding sheet is made without pockets.” And in Gaelic, Yiddish, Spanish, Romanian, Turkish and countless other languages people simply say: “Shrouds have no pockets.”

That’s right and good as far as it goes, but Jesus didn’t tell this parable to warn against the accumulation of material possessions. By themselves, possessions and wealth are not problematic. The God that we worship, after all, is a God of stunning abundance. The first chapter of Genesis amounts to a joyous hymn to God’s abundance—an abundance that God blesses by saying, “It is good, it is good, it is *very* good.” No, our problems show up when what we own begins to own us—that is to say, when we allow love for our things to taint our relationship with God and with each other.

“Teacher,” says someone to Jesus, “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” This is not a request, it’s a demand. Jesus is awake enough to the person’s motivation to say, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or *divider* (a closer rendering of the Greek) who set me to be a divider over you?” He is clearly not willing to facilitate the family fracture beginning to emerge. But without shaming or blaming, Jesus names the motivation: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” The Greek word for greed is “pleonexia,” and it means the “insatiable desire for more.”

Now, most of you remember Nelson Rockefeller, the former governor of New York and vice-president under Ford, who was an heir to the impressive Rockefeller industrial fortune. His name alone conjures images of enormous financial wealth. Some years ago, someone asked Rockefeller how much money was enough. His response was: “Just a little more.”

You see, what Jesus is warning against is not money. It's about trying to feed a beast that can never be satisfied. It's about allowing yourself to be distracted by the accumulation of material things so that you begin to put them before the Lord your God and before your neighbors. This is exactly why Paul called greed "idolatry" in his letter to the Colossians.

The rich man in the parable is, like Nelson Rockefeller, among the upper one percent of his community. He is a landowner, who lives and works on property that, in the parable, yields an unexpected bounty. His problem isn't that he's had an unusually good harvest. His problem is not that he is a "one-percenter." His problem is not that he is thinking about the future or that he took care of his belongings. He has not, as far as we know, stolen or cheated anyone or treated his servants unfairly.

No, you see, the crux of the farmer's problem is that his good fortune has curved his vision in on himself alone.

The conversation he has is not with a family member or with a friend or even with God, but only with and only about...*himself*: "I will do this: I will pull down *my* barns...I will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And I will say to *my* soul...relax, eat, drink, be merry'."

We admire individualism. In fact, we are so entranced by individualism that when there are two people in a car, we let them to drive in something called a "*high-occupancy* vehicle" lane. But the rugged individual in this parable is having an entirely self-centered conversation, including a little chat with his own soul—a chat that he envisions *inside* the conversation he is already having with himself!

God calls him a fool because the man has fallen under the spell of the insatiable beast that can never be fed. He is after "just a little more." He has missed the greater truth that the life that God creates in abundance is good. The life that God creates in abundance is for all of us. The life that God creates in abundance is just that—abundantly plentiful.

The rich man had the opportunity to be excitedly grateful. He could have gathered all of his servants, friends and neighbors and said, "I have been blessed with an unusually large harvest this year. It's more than I could store even if I wanted to so I want you all to take part in this gift. I want to give you all of the surplus to lay up in *your* silos. That way, we'll all have enough."

Imagine the good he could have done for the community. Imagine how that community would respond in the future if one of his harvests was lean. Instead of "You can't take it with you," there is an African proverb that I think

captures this better. It says: “When the left hand washes the right hand and the right hand washes the left hand, both hands become clean.”

Remember, Jesus is telling this parable to a demanding person who seems intent on fracturing family relationships in the pursuit of material gain. Consistently, throughout the Gospels, Jesus teaches that the good life is created and maintained by loving God first and foremost, and then loving each other. It ain't about the money. It's about the relationships. In the parable and in life.

But unlike with money, with relationships you *can* take with you. An uplifting indication of that difference is that we *can* take and trust our relationship with God along with us as we lay dying. You can hear the depressing side of that distinction is in a bluegrass song, of course, that goes: “...she took her heart an' took off down that road. An' they say you can't take it with you when you go. Good news is: ain't much here left for packin'. Bad news is: she left behind a million memories. All the echoes of her cryin', lovin' an' laughin'. Left me with nothin' left to do but leave. That ol' house is in the rear view: ridin' shotgun is her ghost. Who says you can't take it with you when you go.¹”

It's about relationships.

Not only is the landowner disastrously self-involved in his conversation, but he has made a miscalculation in the *content* of that conversation. You fool!” God says to the rich landowner. “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

When God says that the rich man's life is being demanded of him, that's a phrase used to describe a loan being called in. That is to say that God is reminding the man that his very life is on loan from God. As for the things he has prepared, these, too, belong to God as does all creation.

Imagine living as though you were constantly aware that everything you had was on loan from God—the clothes you wear, the tools you work with, the food you eat, the place where you sleep, the books you read—everything! Imagine living as though you were constantly aware that even your body, mind and soul were on loan from God.

The Rule of St. Benedict that influences our Anglican identity at the roots is a balanced and grounded school for exactly this kind of non-attachment. Benedict teaches a powerful sense of trustee-ship—an attitude that allows us to enjoy material things, but with a sense of responsibility for

¹ Church, Eric. “Can't Take it With You.” From the album *Sinners Like Me*. Capitol Records, Nashville. 2006.

how we use them and who we use them for. From this perspective, material things begin to unveil God's beauty and goodness, and our experiences of God's loving abundance becomes increasingly tangible. Seeking to live and work in God's creation from a non-attached custodial perspective is the antidote to the lure of unquenchable consumerism and selfish consumption. Living and working as though we are responsible for returning to God everything that we have and everything that we are also opens profoundly liberating personal gifts—that is to say, it makes us “rich toward God.”

So if you want to redirect your “insatiable desire for more” toward the purpose of becoming “rich toward God,” live and work so that, as Benedictines say, “in all things God may be glorified.” Be insatiable in fostering appreciation for our fragile planet home. Be insatiable in serving justice and in building solidarity. Be insatiable in spreading the love and abundance of God. “That way,” as Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote, “when it comes time to show God what is in your treasure chest, there won't be any doubt in either of your minds that you are rich, rich, rich.”

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