

Luke 12:13-21
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“God’s Economy”

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Lately I have taken to watching Steve Harvey as host of Family Feud, a game show where two families compete to name the most popular responses to survey questions in order to win cash and prizes. The two families made up of 5 players each try to win points. The first family to win 300 points wins the game and gets to play the fast round for more money and prizes. It may not sound like a lot but a family can walk away with over 20,000 dollars in just 30 minutes, not too bad for a short afternoon’s work. And, as long as they keep winning, the family gets to come back for 4 more shows. When a family wins big they often jump around and celebrate as if they were zillionaire’s.

Today we hear a parable about a Rich Farmer. Professor David Lose asks, “So what is the Farmer’s error? Why does Jesus use this story as a negative example?” Jesus talked about money and its effect on our spiritual health far more than any other topic, but why did this abundant harvest cause such an uproar?

The story does not portray the farmer as wicked - that is, he did not gain his wealth illegally or immorally. The parable does not portray him as elitist, thinking he deserved this abundance because he is better than others. What is wrong about building larger barns to store away some of today's bounty for a potentially leaner tomorrow?

Well, maybe nothing, and then again, let’s look a little closer. First of all, in the three verses of the farmer’s story he refers to himself 10 times. The farmer has fallen prey to worshipping the most popular of gods: The Unholy Trinity of "me, myself, and I." And in those three verses how often does he make mention of anyone else? Never. There is no thought to using the abundance to help the hungry, no expression of gratitude to God for this good fortune.

So this story opens up a discussion about our world today, filled not only with families who have and others who have not, but filled with nations who have a lot and nations who have not enough. It opens up a discussion about God’s economy. Or we might ask how do we follow Christ in a consumer society?

Is our value as a person, as a nation, as a world grounded in thinghood or personhood? Does faith call us to market a product or intrinsically value each person? Is the goal of life consumption or self-gift?

When we ground our value in how much we have, it leads us to domination, manipulation, retaliation, punishment, defense, devaluation of life, demand, competition. But when, by faith, we value who each other is as a gift of God, it leads to acceptance of weaknesses, respect of freedom, forgiveness, healing, defenselessness, exaltation of the least among us, invitation, sharing, and giving.

Living in Intentional Community on Sabbatical I discovered a most sharing of economies. All the food, all the work, all the chores, all the farming, all the maintenance, all the decision making, even a lot of the money was set up so each member of the community contributed in some way. If I couldn't help dig a trench perhaps I provided some tools, or advice about how to do this best. At La'Akea all the members participated in each aspect of community life. As a shared economy I found it to be a more deeply spiritual experience.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "earth provides enough to satisfy every person's need, but not every person's greed."

Rev. Dr. James Forbes, retired pastor of historic Riverside Church in New York City said, "Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

If there is too much of the unholy trinity of "Me, myself and I" it leads to a second concern Jesus is raising for us to consider. While making provisions for his future is not foolish; the farmer in the parable is foolish because he believes that by his wealth he can secure his future. At one point he addresses his own soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Do you begin to see the systematic pattern as I differentiate God's economy? When we ground our view of life in ourselves, all of a sudden we have something to protect, which means we have to form opinions about who is coming for our stuff and who isn't. We have to arm ourselves to protect our stuff, and lock our storage bins so we protect our things.

The ironic part of this is, while we like to pretend we are self-made people... look at the farmer in the parable... He would not have had his great harvest without a lot of help; the sun and the rain sent by God to help crops grow, the natural growth of seed bearing plants which he in turn could plant, trained employees to cultivate the ground and collect the harvest properly, and so much more.

Jesus in this story invites us to be "Rich towards God." And then he cautions us that where we go astray is not by having wealth, but when we begin believing that our wealth can secure our future, make us independent – from others, from need, from God.

So in closing I want to share one last quote from a wise pastor who asks, "are you living to make a killing, to make a living, or to make a giving?"

Make a giving... Instead of hoarding all his earnings and planning a quiet, lazy life, imagine if the farmer decided to pay bonuses to all his workers. Started handing out the extra food to people in town who didn't have enough, or used the extra money to build schools, and make peace?

When he died he wouldn't be soon forgotten like a contestant on Family Feud. He'd be the guy so loved that his funeral would be over capacity and stories about him would be told for many generations to come.

Amen