

July 31, 2022

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:13-21

“Living Will”

1. I once went to a financial seminar offered by the Presbyterian Church’s Board of Pensions.
 - a. The Board of Pensions is the part of the church which administers retirement pensions for our ministers, and the medical, disability and death benefits for ministers and their families. It was funded back in 1717. <https://www.pensions.org/our-role-and-purpose/about-us/our-history>
 - b. The seminar was a part of a larger effort of the national church to help ministers be good stewards of their resources, and to make us aware of some specific benefits the board offers which ministers could access (like being able to get up to \$10,000 in debt relief)
 - c. In small groups, they asked us to reflect on the messages about money we grew up with
 - d. The presenter said, and I believe rightly so, that we in the church have a hard time talking about money
 - e. As we shared in my small group, I told them that mom was very open talking about money.
 - i. Dad was a public-school teacher and had to work a 2nd job to make ends meet
 - ii. Mom was a magician with money
 - iii. She didn’t work outside the home, and was very good at saving money to make improvements to the house
 - iv. She was able to stretch her budget for food, clothing etc. for the family
 - v. But it was always done in the context of knowing that what we had was a blessing from God
 - vi. So I remember one time, I must have been in elementary school, that I happened to be in their bedroom with mom when dad got back from work
 - vii. Though I am pretty sure our family had a bank account, I remember distinctly dad walking into the bedroom and handing mom a white envelope with cash
 - viii. Dad had just cashed his paycheck.
 - ix. Mom took the bills out of the envelope, and she began to make little piles on the dresser. She was narrating her process, surely for my benefit:
 1. She started this way: “This is for the tithe at church...”
 2. Then “This is for the mortgage... gas... electricity... water... groceries...”
 3. On and on, until the very end, with a few bills left, she handed them to dad. “Y esto es para usted... and this is for you.” His allowance.
 - x. She always made sure that the first little pile was to say thank you to God.
 - xi. So, while we didn’t grow up with a lot of money, mom made sure that we talked about money not as something to work yourself to the bone for, or as something to be hoarded, but rather as part of a larger set of blessings God gave us, and our offering (big or small, it didn’t matter) was a way to acknowledge that what we had had come from God.
 - xii. Mom was so proud of that house she and dad built, always fussing keeping it in good shape, a house which became the only inheritance she and dad could afford to leave behind for us kids.

2. Today is one of the many times I wished I could pick up the phone and call mom and dad and ask them for their take on this passage.
 - a. Surely mom would have said: that rich man had lost perspective, had lost his way
 - b. In our passage Jesus is teaching against greed, and towards a sense of trust
 - i. First we hear of someone who wanted Jesus to help contest the way an inheritance had been divided. Jesus tells him: watch out for greed!
 - ii. Then Jesus tells the parable of a rich man who seems to be selfishly hoarding his wealth, only to come to the end of his life unexpectedly (and as the saying goes, “you can’t take it with you.”)
 - iii. Finally, in a passage which follows immediately after ours, Jesus says: “Consider the lilies [of the field], how they grow: they neither toil nor spin... if God so clothes the grass of the field... how much more will [God] clothe you...! do not be afraid... Sell your possessions, and give alms... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
 - c. Read from a twenty-first century, North American perspective, we look at parable in the passage, and we may scratch our heads a little bit.
 - i. What was the guy doing wrong? He worked hard, saved his money, and wanted to retire comfortably.
 - ii. But I can hear my dad, ever the teacher, making a grammatical point: “M’hijito, notice that the man in the parable speaks only in the first person singular...”
 1. In other words, it’s all me, me, I, I, my, my, my...
 2. Dad, who knew the meaning of a hard day’s work in his father’s fields, would have added “There is very little me, me, me in a harvest, or tending a herd of cattle. It’s not the labor of a single person, but of a family, even a community.”
 - iii. As we did in last week’s passage, we turn the spotlight to the characters in the wings, as it were, which the story doesn’t name
 1. The man’s wife magically stretching their supplies in lean years
 2. The man’s children and hired hands, toiling shoulder to shoulder
 3. The man’s impoverished neighbors, which Biblical law gave permission to pick up scraps of grain left behind in the field
 4. Of course Jesus is telling the story to make a point, highlighting the one man, but the crowd wouldn’t have needed to be told of their existence, any more than if I tell you that a person drove here I don’t have to explain that the car had fuel in the tank (or charge in the battery).
 - a. It took all those people to bring the harvest home
 - b. But all the man could think about was me, me, me.
 - iv. What worries me the most about this story is the hoarding
 1. Think of rich Pharaoh storing up grain on the advice of Joseph back in Genesis
 2. When the time of drought came, rich Pharaoh got richer, selling grain to those who had lived hand to mouth, obtaining their lands, even purchasing people as indentured servants so they could buy food.

3. In our parable, the man's greed keeps him from noticing all who depended on their work in that farm: family or employee.
 4. And greed makes the man forget the God who brought the rain and sun to provide the growth.
 5. He had lost his way, my mom would say.
3. Last week, one of our faithful church members rightly took me to task for my sermon on prayer. "You forgot to mention that prayer is also to give God thanks." Indeed it is.
 - a. When mom and dad prayed aloud, whether before dad went to work, or at the table offering grace, their prayers always started with giving God thanks for God's blessings, in the lean years, in the years of plenty, in the years of health, in the years of illness.
 - b. And that prayerful attitude of thanksgiving permeated their daily lives and settled any anxiety of what tomorrow would bring.
 - c. To be rich towards God, as Jesus puts it, is about recognizing that we live in community and as such have responsibility to one another, to share in the blessings.
 - d. Life is a team sport. The man in the parable willfully forgot that.
 4. As part of our work in the Matthew 25 initiative, we have spoken of the three areas of focus
 - a. Building congregational vitality
 - b. Dismantling structural racism
 - c. Eradicating systemic poverty
 - d. Today's parable helps me think about the notion that poverty is the result of systems in place
 - i. When greed makes people forget human life is about community
 - ii. When hoarding creates disparities and even manufactures scarcity
 - iii. When we buy into a sinful narrative that idolizes the so-called makers and demonizes the so-called takers
 - iv. In a world with as many resources as we have, if we understood ourselves as being in it together, there would be no such thing as need or poverty.
 - e. It's amazing what a little humility and a prayer of thanksgiving to God can do, in the lips of the one who has silo full of grain, and the one who wonders where their next meal will come from
 - i. For if both feel a part of a larger community, they both know what it means to be generous and to be gracious, for they have experienced in their own ways both of these extremes
 - f. Mom and dad left us kids their only asset, the house, in their will.
 - i. But it was also while they were living that they saw their meager assets as a source of blessing to be shared not hoarded
 1. Whether that meant the offering at church
 2. Helping a friend or relative in need
 3. Lending hand to a neighbor or stranger at their door
 - ii. I think of it like an inheritance being shared in life, a kind of "living will," if you'd let me stretch the meaning of that term.
 5. When Jesus teaches us against "stor[ing] up treasures for [our]selves but [instead to be] rich towards God" he is calling us to live humbly and in community, and live into gratitude, generosity and graciousness.

Reflection questions

1. Growing up, what is one message your parents gave you about money / the use of money?
2. In the passage from Luke 12:13-21, is Jesus against rich people? Why or why not?
3. Share your interpretation of Jesus' last sentence in the passage: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

Sources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-4>

(*Wisdom Commentary. Luke 10-24* by Barbara E Reid, OP and Shelly Matthews)