

**A Fool & His Money
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
August 1, 2010**

Old Testament Lesson -- Psalm 23 (NRSV)

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.
⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

New Testament Lesson -- Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”



This past March, Kerin and I travelled to Nicaragua with 11 of our Clemson PSA students on a mission trip. We were hosted by CEPAD which is a consortium of protestant denominations in Nicaragua that have been working together for almost 40 years to serve God by serving the people of Nicaragua.

While we were there, we spent several days out in the small village of Malacatoya. Malacatoya is a farming village located about three hours drive northeast of the capital city of Managua, up in the mountains. The village consists of small farms scattered along the side of a narrow gravel road, each with a small home, usually cinder block, with no indoor plumbing, and few of the amenities that we have come to expect from American homes.

Meals were cooked over open fires, toilet facilities were in outhouses out back, and “showers” consisted of a cistern of water and a bucket. Colin Pettigrew, Nathan Weaver, and I stayed in the home of Dom Orlando, one of the leaders of the community and the operator of the local store, as well as a farmer of passion fruit and coffee. Orlando’s home was deemed suitable to host a group of American college students and their minister because it had the luxury of a concrete floor.

Dom Orlando’s family was warm and they welcomed us into their home, offering us cots in the front room, which doubled as the store, and gave me the unique experience of sleeping next to a table full of machetes. The room was lit by a single incandescent bulb in the ceiling, and their television was adorned with a set of rabbit ears, but the walls were covered with photographs of their children and their children’s families and Dom Orlando was more than proud to tell us about them.

While we were there, we worked on a soil conservation project building erosion breaks in the local farmer’s fields, most of which were located along the steep slopes of hills. Remember, we were in the mountains...

But while we worked, agents from CEPAD, representatives of the Church, held seminars in the fields teaching the local farmers how to test the sand and clay content of their soil, and advising them on what crops might grow well on their lands and how to increase the yield of the crops they were already growing.

One farmer on whose land we were working, had been growing coffee with only moderate success for years. Why coffee? Because that's what his family had always grown. But Joel (Hoel), one of our friends with CEPAD, tested the soil and found that it was not very good for coffee but that a crop of banana trees would likely do much better.

Now these were missionaries of the Church in Nicaragua, but you could be forgiven for mistaking them for agents of the Clemson Extension Service. You see there, the Church sees its mission as not just preaching and teaching, and administering the sacraments and providing pastoral care, although they certainly do those things. In Nicaragua the churches also see as their mission to help the people to provide for their families and to meet the needs of their children.

On our last day in Malacatoya, the director of CEPAD in that area spoke to us. Through a translator he told us "Jesus said in the Gospel of John (10:10), 'I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.' When our bellies are full, we experience abundant life."

I've been thinking a lot about that this week; about abundant life and what it means to enjoy abundance, and about our own abundance, about the fine line between abundance and greed, and whether we are on the right side of it.

In the passage we read today, Jesus warns against greed and cautions that "life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." To make his point, Jesus tells the story of a certain man whose land produced abundantly. So much so that his barns were overwhelmed and he began to make plans to build bigger barns to hold all that the fields produced. And he is so excited about his harvest that when the barns are completed, he plans to "relax, eat, drink, and be merry."

And while I know this is supposed to be a warning against greed, my first impression is that this man sounds like a wise man; wise because he is aware that just because the fields produce this year, does not mean they will next year; wise because he does not treat his newfound abundance, as my father used to say, like it was burning a hole in his pocket; wise because he saved for a rainy day.

How many times have we heard it said "A penny saved is a penny earned?" Or "Waste not, want not?" Members of the generation that survived the great depression, like my grandparents, learned to save everything and found great wisdom in being frugal. You see, you saved what you had, because there might not be more coming later.

As a child, I watched my mother reuse butter dishes to save leftovers. That's two frugal acts right there: when you cook something, you eat it until it's gone and since the dish comes free with the butter, you might as well use it. It works just as good as Tupperware, and costs a whole lot less. I've been drilled since I can remember that saving is wise, and in these days of economic uncertainty, those lessons have been well used.

But there is also a biblical precedent for saving during times of great abundance.

In Genesis 41, Joseph advises Pharaoh regarding his dreams about seven fat cows and seven thin cows and seven fat ears of grain and seven thin ones. Joseph interprets the dreams to mean there will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine in the land and advises Pharaoh to store up grain in barns during the plentiful years so that there will be plenty during the lean years.

It is because of this that Pharaoh appoints Joseph to a position second only to Pharaoh and says of Joseph, "there is no one as discerning and wise as you."

Yet when God speaks to the man in this parable, God calls him not wise, but a fool. Why?

First, the man speaks only of “my crops,” “my grain,” “my goods,” and “my soul,” which demonstrates that he does not recognize God as the source of the abundance he enjoys. Secondly, God’s question “the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” draws us back to the fact that this man has given no consideration to the needs of the people around him. Even though he has filled his barns, with plenty left over (in other words, his wildest expectations for this harvest have been far exceeded) he STILL has no thought of using his overwhelming excess to help someone else who may not have been so richly blessed.

Jewish law addresses how one is supposed to respond after the harvest. Deuteronomy 14 states that when the harvest is brought in, a tithe is given to God, which is consumed in a feast that is shared with the widows, orphans, aliens in their land and any others who may not have access to such abundance of their own.

New Testament scholar Audrey West notes “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 act 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.” (West, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, pg. 312)

All that he has stored up for himself will not bring him life. But the implication is that had he shared it with others, the great harvest could have brought life to others within his community.

What looks at first like wisdom, is actually foolishness. I am reminded of Jesus’ words earlier in Luke (9:25) “what does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but loose or forfeit themselves?”

The troubling thing about this parable is that many of us, put in the same position as the man God calls a fool, would probably have done the same thing. In this economy with things as uncertain as they are, if we hit the jackpot, the smart thing to do would be to save it all in case this recession-not a recession-downturn keeps going longer than we expect. The wise thing to do, it seems, would be to hunker down and save as much as possible, but here Jesus seems to suggest that the faithful thing to do is to share God’s abundance with others so that others may have abundant life as well.

Which points us to what this parable is really about: faith and the foolish man’s lack of it.

If we read on in Luke’s gospel just a bit, we will understand this parable even more.

²²He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus reminds his hearers that God will provide and that worry about food and shelter and clothing should not be what drives them, rather they should strive after the Kingdom of God, and trust in God’s providence.

Now for any sensible person, this has to sound frightening or crazy or maybe both. It is not rational to expect to just go about our daily lives and pay no heed to our daily needs, expecting them to be met by divine intervention. No, we have come to believe that God provides *through* the normal systems of human life: through using our talents to perform necessary jobs to earn paychecks to provide for our needs.

It is like the old preacher's story of the man who finds himself trapped atop the roof of his house during a sudden, and raging flood. He prays to God to save him from the waters. Three times, boats come by offering the man assistance and three time he sends them away saying "I have faith and I am waiting for God to save me." When the rising waters finally sweep the man to his death, he finds himself standing at the pearly gates before St. Peter so he demands to know why his faith was not rewarded; why did God not save him. "Well," says St. Peter, "we sent you three boats but you kept sending them away."

In our reformed tradition we affirm that God usually moves in and through the created order to bring about God's will , and Biblical examples to the contrary, divine intervention is actually pretty rare. So the upshot is we do not give away our paychecks and expect God to provide something for us to eat and a place to live: God already did. That's what the paycheck was for.

But what Jesus does emphasize here is that our lives should not be dictated by worry over necessities; that our lives should be characterized by a concerted effort to live into the Kingdom of God, and to trust in that God who calls us to share God's gracious bounty with those who are in need.

In his commentary on Luke's Gospel, R. Allen Culpepper notes :

"The rich fool may protest that he has always believed in God, but when it comes to managing his life, dealing with possessions and planning for the future, he lives as though there were no God. The parable, therefore probes our basic commitments. What difference should our faith in God make in the practical matters of life?" (NIB Commentary: Luke-John, pg.257)

And that really gets to the heart of the matter. We can say that we trust in God all we want, but how we live will show the extent of our faith.

Of course, we have to be careful, because it would be easy to misunderstand what is being called for here. Jesus is not calling us to a sort of self-imposed poverty that gives everything away and which places unrealistic expectations on God's willingness and ability to provide, but neither is Jesus calling us to a token charity that shares only what is safe and trusts in God's provision not at all.

There is a sweet spot in between: a place where we give more than what is safe to help those who have very little, but at the same time, provide for our families and meet their needs as well. It is a place where we share not just a pittance of what is left over, but where we make pledges and commitments that stretch us and which force us to trust in the goodness of God who provides.

And make no mistake, God has provided for us abundantly. We may not feel very wealthy, but by the world's standards, we certainly are. According to a report issued by the World Bank in 2008, at least 80% of the world's population lives on just \$10.00 a day *or less* and almost half the world (over 3 billion people) live on just \$2.50 a day *or less*.

<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

The 2006 United Nations Human Development report (pp 6, 7, 35) notes that some 1.1 Billion people in the developing world do not have adequate access to water. This week I caught myself being perturbed that this hot summer has made the water coming out of my tap... the one I just turn on in my bathroom... that brings abundant water into my house so that I do not have to carry it from a well or stream several miles away every morning... yes, I caught myself thinking that water was lukewarm, and not very refreshing.

In seventh grade, one of my friends told me that I was rich because my mother didn't have to work. I didn't feel rich, but by his standard I was. And I don't feel wealthy now, but I have no doubt that God has given me more than I need, and is probably disappointed that I haven't shared more of it.

We read the 23rd Psalm this morning because it is a profound statement of faith in our God who not only provides for our needs, but provides abundantly: I shall not want... you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies... my cup overflows.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, my whole life long.” As I’ve shared with you before, in the original Hebrew in which the Psalms were written, the word “follow” in that verse is the same word that is used to describe the pursuit of a hawk for its prey.

So a better reading of the Psalm would be “surely goodness and mercy shall relentlessly pursue me like a hawk chases its prey, never giving up, never letting go.” But if that is truly a statement of what we believe, then we should be prepared to live as though we believe it. And frankly, that means doing more to alleviate the suffering of the poor in this country, and around the world. It means sharing more of the abundance with which God has blessed our lives, with those who have need.

But this Psalm is also an encouragement and a hymn of hope, because it does remind us of God’s never-ending love for each of us and of God’s continued provision for our lives. It is that steadfast love of God that sets us free from fear and sets us free to generously share with others, that with which God has so richly blessed each one of us.

Love that sets us free to help support those ministries that are lacking so much during these tough economic times, ministries like Clemson Community Care that help feed the poor and the hungry; Clemson Child Development Center which provides affordable child care and early childhood education to poor working families, and Safe Harbor which provides a safe place for battered women and children to escape abusive homes.

And while this church has always supported these ministries and others like them, we can do more; we have to do more. Everything that we have comes as a gracious gift from God, and God has given us so much with the intention that we share. How will we share what God has given us? What if we committed to give back to God more than what is comfortable, more than what is safe? What if we sat down each month, paid the mortgage, paid the utilities and the credit cards and figured what would be a fair and safe amount to give to God... and then added 10%? Or half-again as much? Or even doubled it? What if we pushed ourselves beyond what is comfortable and safe and made a real effort to be rich toward God? How much more might the kingdom of God be visible?

That’s my hope for each of us here. That we would carry with us the words of the Psalmist “... surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...” and that we would seek ways to share the goodness and mercy of God that we have experienced, with those who have experienced precious little; setting aside fear of want, and being rich toward God.

I will leave you with this story of one who was rich toward God.

There was an old man who lived in a rundown tenement across the street from a group of college students. His eyes were half-blind from cataracts and he could often be seen shuffling along in two mis-matched left shoes, attending to his errands for the day

His name was Mr. Roth and sometimes he would stop by the student’s home, offering to share the vegetables that he grew in his back yard. As the visits became more frequent, they would sit and talk and listen to Mr. Roth’s stories and enjoy the tune of his harmonica. After a time, the young men decided to do something to help the poor old man, so they went out one day to collect shoes and clothes and a few necessities that they left anonymously outside his door.

The next day Mr. Roth stopped by the students house and reported “The Lord is so good! I came out of my house this morning and found a bag full of shoes and clothing on my porch.”

“That’s wonderful, Mr. Roth!” they said. “We’re happy for you.”

“You know what’s even more wonderful?” he asked. “Just yesterday I met some people that could really use them.”
(Adapted from Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, Larson, Craig Bryan ed., pg.262)

Being rich toward God is facing the fear of not having enough, and sharing what we have anyway. There are those who would call us foolish... but I believe God would call us wise.

To God be all honor, glory, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come.

A Fool and His Money.

Psalms 23

Luke 12:13-21

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