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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/4/2013, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23, Psalm 49:1-11, Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁰But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:20-21, RSV)

A few weeks back, when we were discussing our Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan, I talked about the compassion of the early Christians—how it could be said that they invented the idea of “the poor” as a holy order within humanity deserving of alms and care. This idea can be found in Robert Wilken’s new book *The First Thousand Years*. In his chapter on the poor, Wilken tells this story about famine in ancient Cappadocia—a region in central Turkey:

In the year 368 Cappadocia suffered a terrible famine brought about by a very dry winter, when the skies offered neither rain nor snow. Because the region was inland, without access to the sea, and isolated, it was particularly vulnerable to food shortages. Hungry men and women roamed the roads looking like cadavers, and parents exposed or sold their infants. The suffering of the people, said Basil’s friend Gregory, was intensified by the “insensitivity and greed” of the wealthy. When food ran out, the rich thought only of their own welfare and began to hoard what they had gathered in their barns. Seeing an opportunity to take a profit, they turned the distress of others into a boon for themselves.¹

Like the rich man in this morning’s parable, the wealthy back in suffering Cappadocia gathered their good into their barns with little thought for their hungry neighbors, except, perhaps, for the desperate market they formed.

¹ Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). *The First Thousand Years* (pp. 155-156). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

TWO DIVINE OBJECTIONS

Judging by the Bible, the Lord has two objections to such hardheartedness. One objection concerns our *neighbors*, that they should not be treated unjustly or neglected. The other concerns *ourselves*, that we should not treat ourselves so badly, neglecting our souls and ending up in hell.

The prophets are the masters of the first kind of objection. They condemned greed and injustice. And those who were condemned would have done well to listen and to repent, for the prophets were not expressing simply their own notions, but rather the anger of the Lord about injustice and hardheartedness in the land.

Sometimes the prophets made tender appeals to the people, encouraging them to be more compassionate. For example, we can imagine the prophet Micah directing the Word of Lord toward the rich man and his barns in this morning's story:

⁸He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)²

I hope such an appeal would touch the conscience of the rich man.

But if not, there are also prophetic words of judgment meant for cruel people. High or low, rich or poor, none are exempted from the question of justice – no, not even King David, who showed no pity on Bathsheba and Uriah. No one is free to gather into barns, eat, drink, and be merry with nary a thought for either God or the neighbor. The prophets denounce such egoism and the rich man in today's story would do well to listen to such warnings as this one from Isaiah 5:

⁸Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! ...

²⁴Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will become rotten,
and their blossom go up like dust;
for they have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts,

² See also Isaiah 58:1-10.

and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 5, NRSV)

So, that is the perspective of the *prophets* on the indifference to others of the rich man and his barns.

WISDOM

But today's story offers another slant on injustice – the perspective of Israel's wisdom tradition³. The *prophets* grieved for the poor, the oppressed, and the neglected. The *wisdom* tradition seems to grieve not only for the poor, but also for the *sinner* who neglects the poor. Wisdom would try to save the rich man in this morning's story by opening his eyes to reality. For in the end, what ails the rich man in this story is that he sees far too little in life. In particular, he fails to see and to take into account his Maker. The Lord himself comes on the scene in this story and addresses the rich man. And so it is that we come to our text for this morning:

²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:20-21, RSV)

The word "Fool!" has a defined and settled meaning in the Bible. We read these words about the fool again and again in the Bible:

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)

Let the man with his barns have an IQ of 140. Let him be chairman of the board of a big grain conglomerate. Let people shy away from him, they are so impressed by him. None of this matters if in his heart he says, "There is no God." For such a one is a fool, as the Bible reckons things. He has failed to take into account the largest factor of all: he must one day give an account of himself to God. He must answer to the very God he has ignored. He must answer for the very people in this world he has ignored.

TV, movies, and newspapers are filled with stories of people who for all the world seem to be fools. They live wickedly, as if in their heart of hearts they really believe, There is no God!

³ Credit for this observation goes to Richard Bauckham in his discussion of Luke 12:13-21 in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), pp 380ff.

I believe I have told you before the striking words of a father whose little daughter had been abused by a school teacher, with the teacher receiving but a slap on the wrist, while the daughter's childhood was ruined. Let me repeat them again. I asked the father how he could live with that, with the abuse of his daughter, with little justice available to him on this earth, and he answered with these words:

The gospel means that in the end, no one gets away with anything!

So, the rich man in the story tears down his old barns and builds new ones. He repeats half the old saying, but neglects the second half:

¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.
(Luke 12:19, RSV)

What is that second half of the saying? – the saying known in both the Bible and in pagan antiquity:

Let us eat and drink, *for tomorrow we die*. (Isaiah 22:13. Also 1 Corinthians 15:30-32)

The rich man seemed to think that he was going to live forever. Far better would it have been for him to have lived *today* being mindful also of eternity. For the Gospel means also this: In the end, no one gets away with anything!

IRONY

So, there is a kind of irony in our Lord's parable this morning. The parable is about the *rich man* and his barns. But it turns out that this rich man is not rich at all. Oh, he might have barns full of grain and gold coins stacked up to the ceiling. Yet, for all that, he has made himself poor. Why? Because poor and foolish is the one "who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Think of Scrooge, for example. I know it is the middle of summer, but let me take you back to the wintertime, to my Christmas sermon last year about Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Especially I am drawn to the passage in which Marley's Ghost surveys his life and all the misery he has either caused or failed to lift a finger to help. Such regret! Marley had been Scrooge's business partner. Now Marley is condemned to wander the world observing the

suffering that folks endure, but no longer with any ability to help, for he is just a ghost.

Marley says that in his earthy life, he did not permit himself to know how important charity is. His heart had been too hard, too much preoccupied with money, too indifferent to those around him. There was so much he *should have* known, only he had let his greed get in the way. Now he feels shame not to have known:

Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!"

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

"Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

Someday, I fear, the rich man in today's parable is going to know such regret. He is going to look back on his life and feel shame for the good at hand he neglected — good he could have done, but did not. God and his neighbors were "his business"! But, alas, he neglected his business. So how solid can his life be?

Even in his present life, he is not really so rich as he would like to think, for his story is barren — barren of friends, barren of family, barren of the good works his Maker intended for him.

One simple way to phrase the Gospel is that Jesus Christ is *not* like this, and he is the one in charge! Jesus is *not* like the rich man and his barns who gathers into larger barns and whispers not a single word of sympathy for his neighbors. Just the reverse: Jesus does not hoard or cling to wealth, but rather makes himself poor that we might have some real hope in life and in eternity:

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

... IF GOD WISHES

I end by lifting up a pattern of speech common to Christians in Tanzania. My wife, Carol, told me about this. In fact, this Tanzanian turn of phrase is one of the reasons my wife loves the African Christians so much.

The striking thing about the rich man in today's parable is how confident he is that his days promise to be happy ones. "Soul," he says to himself, "you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry." But the Tanzanian Christians are more humble about tomorrow. And so their common turn of phrase is "... if God wishes." For example, "I will see you tomorrow *if God wishes*." "I will build a barn *if God wishes*."

Well, what God really wishes for us is that we should have life, and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). It is for this reason that Jesus lived and died and rose again for us, that buoyed along by his life and his protection, we can turn to those things that truly make for a rich life here below: I mean, love of God and love of our neighbors in the name of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.