

Meditation for a Rich Fool

Sermon for July 31, 2016

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Hosea 11:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

This morning's gospel passage begins with a "Hey Jesus, can *you* tell my brother...?" Now if this man thought about how brother stories work out in the bible-- Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, The Prodigal Son and his elder brother-- he would have realized that fairness in sibling rivalry is not the moral of the story.

Further, Jesus in this case refuses to be triangulated as a wedge in the relationship between a man and his brother-- and certainly not over the matter in which wealth takes precedence over the bonds of brotherly love. Certainly when the power imbalance grossly tips to favor one's privilege over another's oppression, we Christians rightly feel called to take a stand, such as through COFIA, which advocates for Guatemalan day laborers when get cheated out of the agreed upon price for their physical labor in a practice called wage theft. COFIA provides a network of advocates that helps workers call on their employers to do the right thing and pay the promised amount. But I do not think the brother addressing Jesus means the same thing.

Perhaps Jesus saw something in this man: the angry curl of his lips, the mocking way he said "brother," or a polished presentation which-- in contrast to the dusty crowd-- showed that he in fact was not in need of any inheritance. Something about this man triggered for Jesus the assumption that this brother was held captive by *things* rather than by love. And so, Jesus launched into a parable about how our attachment to material possessions keeps us from being "rich toward God."

In a sermon called "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool," The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. explored this parable and what it had to say to the context of 1967. 49 years later, I find it eerie how powerfully King's words fit into the culture and politics of our day now. As I prepared for preaching today, I came upon King's sermon. After reading it, it was as if the mic dropped! There was part of me that

thought it would have been more valuable for me to share with you King's whole sermon, or even better to play a recording of it this morning for worship. However, (paraphrasing what King said in part of his sermon), the wealthy foundation of this country was built on the backs of slave labor. The wealth of the country remains in the hands of white people while people of color struggle on the margins of an economy that couldn't exist without them. Even if King's sermon is better than mine, I won't take a free ride on his words; the gospel deserves my efforts to grapple with it with integrity. You should read Dr. King's sermon though, and I will share two paragraphs from it.

In exploring why the rich man would be called a fool by God, Dr. King wondered about this man's life:

"He may have had great books in his library, but he never read them. He may have had recordings of great music of the ages, but he never listened to it. He probably gave his wife mink coats, a convertible automobile, but he didn't give her what she needed most, love and affection. (*Yes*) He probably provided bread for his children, but he didn't give them any attention; he didn't really love them. Somehow he looked up at the beauty of the stars, but he wasn't moved by them. He had heard the glad tidings of philosophy and poetry, but he really didn't read it or comprehend it, or want to comprehend it. And so this man justly deserved his title. He was an eternal fool. (*Yes*) He allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived. (*Yes*)

Now number two, this man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others. (*Yes*) Now if you read that parable in the book of Luke, you will discover that this man utters about sixty words. And do you know in sixty words he said "I" and "my" more than fifteen times? (*My Lord*) This man was a fool because he said "I" and "my" so much until he lost the capacity to say "we" and "our." (*Yes*) He failed to realize that he couldn't do anything by himself. This man talked like he could build the barns by himself, like he could till the soil by himself. And he failed to realize that wealth is always a result of the commonwealth.

And oh my friends, I don't want you to forget it. No matter where you are today, somebody helped you to get there. (*Yes*) It may have been an ordinary person, doing an ordinary job in an extraordinary way. Some few are able to get some education; you didn't get it by yourself. Don't forget those who helped you come over."<sup>1</sup>

From here, Dr. King went on to describe how the wealth of this country was built on the backs of Black slave labor. And even before that, the land itself was taken from native peoples who lived here first. Nothing is solely *ours*.

But what does belong to us is God's love. This treasure cannot be earned, but it can and should be shared. Like the manna that fell to the ground and fed the Hebrews wandering through the wilderness, this treasure cannot be hoarded and stored away. We must simply rely on its abundance and we will be given all that we need. Hosea the prophet describes a God who leads us with "cords of kindness and bands of love." If we let ourselves be tethered to this God rather than to wealth that will not follow us beyond death, we will find the ways toward God's peace. It is a peace even more profound than to relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests this: "if you have to be greedy, then be greedy for love. Be greedy for justice, and wisdom, and significance. That way, when it comes time to show God what is in your treasure chest, there won't be any doubt your minds that you are rich, rich, rich."<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool" sermon preached at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church in Chicago, August 27, 1967

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Treasure Hunt: Luke 12:13-21" in *Review and Expositor* January 1, 2002 p. 104

## Guided meditation:

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus guides us from what we should not do or become. But how do we find the treasure of which Jesus speaks? Jesus gives no treasure map. It is a spiritual practice to discover where to find this treasure. And so I invite you to join me in this guided meditation and seek what it is Jesus offers.

Close your eyes and take a deep breath, giving thanks for the oxygen on which your body relies. Consider the bed from which you awoke this morning. What was your first thought or feeling of the day?

Consider the things you ate or drank today. Swirl your tongue in your mouth and taste what remnants remain. Today God has given you your daily bread, and there is more to come. Give thanks.

God wants you to have what you need. Food. Clothing. A home. Do you have the basics of what you need for life? If so, pause and give thanks. If not, take this moment to ask God for help.

Consider now that which goes beyond basic need. Look at what barns you have built! Barns to store wealth you have accumulated but, let's be honest, you have *not* earned on your own. Visualize your possessions, all the material goods that tether you. What gadgets make you feel more powerful at work? What clothing makes you feel more popular at school? What addictions mask your pain? One at a time, imagine yourself letting them go. Visualize them floating away, getting smaller and smaller in the distance. With each release, there is a loss, yes. But for any one of those things released, is there also freedom? Peace? Joy? As you watch them float away, imagine your shoulders becoming lighter and your muscles relaxing. Feel the chair that is holding you up, the ground that is sturdy beneath your feet. Breathe in, breathe out. You can let go and you still have your breath. You still have the ground beneath you.

Now take a moment to appreciate the things you have accomplished.

Picture some faces that helped you get there: first think of those who gave you material aid: who allowed for you to go to school; who gave you money when you needed it; who made sure you had a home, and food, and clothing. Who taught you? Who kept you safe? Find a picture of that person in your head. Thank him. Thank her.

Then think of someone who introduced you to an idea you took hold of, an idea that led you to make sense of the world or an idea that motivated you to change it. Thank him. Thank her.

Think of someone who encouraged you after you failed. Someone who helped you feel grace and encouragement instead of shame and defeat. Thank her. Thank him.

Think of a person who led you to your favorite work of art, or music, or writing-- and of who created the art in the first place. Thank her. Thank him.

Has someone shown you how to stand up to a bully? Have you had the courage to do that yet? For this strength modeled, thank your teacher, and imagine yourself having the courage to stand for what is right, not caring about the consequences.

Consider this: Jesus approaches your body and tells you that your body is a treasure chest for God's love. Yes, *your* body, with its wrinkles or its pimples and its funny smells. Your body, with the frizzy, kinky, oily or greying hair-- that is, if you still have hair. Your body, with the lips that wrestle to get out words foreign to the tongue. Your body, with the pacemaker. Your body, which could not bear a child for long enough but somehow manages to bear God. Your body that will one day die is a treasure chest for one who is eternal. Breathe into your body. Forgive your body for being human. Now love your body for being human. Breathe in again, knowing that God is even nearer to you than your very breath, knowing that

even when your breath will one day be taken from you, God will never be taken from you.

Think of God. In Hosea, we find that God was there, calling you since the time you were a child just learning to walk. God healed you at times you were broken; you may not have even known it was God at work. God bent down to you and fed you. Like one of those people who takes a child and lifts her to the cheek, so intimately connected has God been to you. And this connection! It is not like a puppet string, or an angry list. Do you know how God has led with cords of human kindness and bands of love? Even the things that are your deepest failures, your regrets, your shortcomings; God knows them already. To be honest, there have been moments when God's heart has recoiled by things you have done, by things I have done-- or left undone. And yet. And yet.

God still offers treasure. Jesus wants to lead you to that treasure. Jesus wants to reveal it to you. Imagine asking Jesus "how do I get there? How do I find it?" Jesus smiles and says "You know," and "It has been with you always; look." As you look at what Jesus shows you, you feel peace. You feel hope. You feel joy. You turn back and look at your barns. They do not have quite the same lustre as before. You can look ahead and see the rust and rot they will one day become. You accept that you will probably return to them. But with Jesus you had a foretaste of an even richer treasure. And you know, you can be rich if you want to. Rich in God's mercy. Rich in God's love. Rich in the company of all that God has created, all that you can share together. Amen.