

“Storage”  
Luke 12:13-21  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

September 26, 2021  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Jesus just told us a parable about greed.

I didn't want to preach on this parable because I don't think of you as being greedy. And I didn't want to preach on this parable because I do not like to think of myself as being greedy.

But I also believe that greed—the desire to consume more, to attain more, to control more, to hold onto more and more and more—is perhaps the greatest obstacle to God that you and I face every day.

So I had to preach on this parable.

Even though I don't want to preach on this parable.

Which leads me to ask, would any of you like to come up and preach on this parable instead of me?

No takers?

Well, that's ok.

Maybe I don't have to preach on this parable.

Maybe I can just rely on other people who have preached on this parable, or at least on this topic, through the years.

It's not a new topic—the sin of greed.

Other Christians throughout the centuries have thought deeply about greed, written about greed.

I recall what Leo Tolstoy had to say about greed.

Tolstoy once wrote a short story about a man who loved land.

He loved owning land more than anything.

“If I had plenty of land,” he says, “I shouldn’t fear the Devil himself.”

Well, the Devil overhears this man and starts arranging land-buying opportunities for this man all over the place. The opportunities get better and better, until finally he comes across the Bashkirs, a simple people with an ENORMOUS amount of land.

He negotiates with the Bashkirs, and cannot believe his luck!

They tell him that for a flat fee of 1,000 rubles, he can keep as much of their land as he can circle on foot in a single day, from sunrise to sunset. But if he fails to return before the sun goes down, he gets no land and forfeits the fee.

So the man sets off on his day-long loop, marking his progress with a spade. And every time he starts to think about closing the loop, he sees yet another grassy plain,  
yet another gorgeous stream,  
and he’s got to have those too.

So, the loop that he marks—it expands...and it expands...until finally the shadows lengthen and the man realizes that he’s a long way from home base. If he doesn’t get back in time, he won’t get ANY of the land he’s marked.

In a panic, he begins to walk faster...and then faster...and then he runs, as fast as he can, he’s stretching the limits, in terrible pain...trying to beat the sunset, trying to get there in time!

And just before the last little bit of sun disappears below the horizon, the man reaches home base! The Bashkirs all cheer and they congratulate the man on his splendid achievement.

But the man cannot hear them.

Why can't he hear them?

Because he ran back so fast, he had a heart attack and died.

Tolstoy's story concludes with the man's servant burying him in a six-foot box. Do you know what title Tolstoy gave to that little story?

"How Much Land Does a Man Need?"

The answer comes at the end.

Six feet.

In the end, a person needs no more than six feet of land.<sup>1</sup>

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*"Take care!"* says Jesus.

*"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed..."*

According to Jesus, greed shows up anywhere,  
with anyone, at any time.

Just look at the rich man in this morning's parable.

*"The land of a rich man produced abundantly,"* said Jesus.

What's fascinating is that the main character is NOT a criminal.

He's a successful farmer.

A normal guy.

*"I will store up all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"*

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the book *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists*, by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, for first drawing my attention to Tolstoy's story.

Please take note:

the man's not EVIL, he's not dumb,  
he's not corrupt, and he's not irresponsible.

According to Jesus, he's just...greedy.

I said I didn't want to preach on this parable, because there's something about the parable that makes me a little uncomfortable.

And who wants to come to church to feel discomfort?  
So let's get rid of the discomfort.  
If we're going to talk about greed today, let's have some fun with it.

When I say the word GREED...what image comes to mind?  
Who, in your mind's eye, do you see?

Those Hollywood celebrities who illicitly used their wealth to help their children gain admission to top colleges and universities?

How about—for those of you who remember the 1980s—  
Michael Douglas as Gordon Gecko,  
from the movie Wall Street—"Greed is good!"?

How about Scrooge?  
When he described Scrooge, do you remember what Charles Dickens wrote?

"Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge!  
A squeezing, wrenching,  
grasping, scraping,  
clutching, covetous old sinner!"

Hard and sharp as flint,  
 from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire;  
 secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.”<sup>2</sup>

When Dickens describes him, you can see it, right?  
 You can see the greed!

It’s not hard to see the greed when it’s in someone else.  
 What about when it’s in me?  
 What about when it’s in you?  
 Is it possible for you or me to be greedy?

I said at the beginning that I don’t think of you as greedy, I don’t like to think of myself as greedy. I mean, I guess, theoretically, it’s possible for any of us to occasionally be greedy.

Surely, though if we’re being greedy, we’ll see it.  
 And we’ll correct it.

Will we correct it?  
 Do you believe that when greed comes into our house, we’ll notice him and banish him right away?

A number of years ago, there was a medical situation in our family that did not break the bank in our family, but it did mean that we maxed out with our out-of-pocket expenses, per our insurance, during the course of the year. We hit the number sometime in the summer, and then a bit later that year, the insurance company sent us a statement—not a bill—but a statement saying that a particular visit from February had been reprocessed.

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to William H. Willimon’s book, *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005 for this reference.

In the reprocessing, the insurance company actually paid MORE than they originally paid, which meant that according to the insurance company, we owed LESS back in February than we originally owed.

Which meant that the total that was supposed to be billed to us got refigured—and according to the insurance company, we ended up \$75 short of reaching our maximum out-of-pocket expenses for the year.

So they took the \$75, and charged it to a claim we made in October.

The problem was that we had already PAID the \$75 on the original bill from the original statement...we paid it back in February.

Of course, the hospital's billing department wasn't following things that closely. They just got a statement from the insurance company claiming that we owed an additional \$75, so they sent us a bill for \$75.

So I called the billing department and try to explain the situation.

“We don't owe this money.”

“But your statement says...”

Well, round and round we go, until finally the woman on the other end says, “Let me talk with my supervisor.”

She talks with her supervisor, gets back on the phone.

“Mr. Dorr, you don't owe \$75.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You owe \$30.”

“Excuse me??” I said.

“Well, part of the check you paid back in February went to this, and part went to that...”

So I let it sit, and a month went by, and another bill arrived in the mail.

What do you think that bill was for?

That’s right.

Not \$30. Not \$0.

We’re back to \$75!

And here I am, spending HOUR after HOUR trying to sort it out...

Why was I so fixated on that \$75?

It would not have been a big deal to pay the money, even though I was convinced we did not owe the money.

Why couldn’t I let it go?

I think it was this.

What I felt, most distinctly at that moment, was not a desire to hang on to \$75.

What I wanted to hang onto...was CONTROL.

Control over the illness that had come into our family.

Control over the reason we had all those medical expenses in the first place.

And because I could not control that, I was GRASPING for control wherever else I could try to get it...

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Have you ever done that?

Tried to control something that you knew you could not control, but you kept grasping, trying to control people or situations that were

NOT the main culprit, because you knew, deep down, you could not control the main culprit?

The rich man says:

“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones...And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

In other words, take control!

To which God says:

“This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Who are we kidding?

Who taught us to think that we can control our lives or our futures or our loved ones?

It wasn't Jesus.

Jesus NEVER said—if you just love and follow me, you'll FINALLY find yourself with more control!

What Jesus said was this:

“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

What Jesus said was, “Sell your possessions, and give alms.”

What Jesus said was, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

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Do you see why I didn't want to preach on this parable?

This parable requires some self-examination that I really don't want to spend my time on today. I would much rather spend my down time today watching my Minnesota Vikings try to get their first win of the season, or watching my Yankees try to make it into the playoffs.

And did you notice how many times I used the word "my" just now?

My time.

My Vikings.

My Yankees.

You see, truth is that ALL of us have moments when "MY" becomes our default option. When we strive for control that we're never going to get...and it's often about a lot more serious things than sports.

- This day is MY day, I need to make sure that I spend it exactly the way I want to spend it.
- This child is MY child, I need to make sure they live the kind of life that I want them to live.
- This church is MY church, so I need to make sure that it does the things I want it to do, stands for the issues that I want it to stand for...

Have you ever made "MY" your default way of looking at the world?

As David Foster Wallace put it in his splendid commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005:

“The so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.

“This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about...in the great outside world of wanting and achieving...

“The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in [a] myriad [of] petty, unsexy ways every day.”

“That is real freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

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Maybe that’s why Jesus told this parable.  
Not just to give us an image of what greed looks like.  
But to deepen our imagination about what freedom looks like.

The freedom to be generous.  
The freedom to make sacrifices.  
The freedom to live not for ourselves, but for other people...

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<sup>3</sup> A transcript of David Foster Wallace’s speech can be found at [Microsoft Word - DFWKenyonAddress2005.docx \(purdue.edu\)](#).

True freedom is found in sharing the gift of our lives and the gift of our love and the gifts of our money and energy and time—all of it—and when we share **all of it** joyfully and generously not just with those we love, but even with those we don't love, even with those we've never met—it's not bondage, and that's not a burden.

According to Jesus, it's freedom.

**And maybe that's why I didn't want to preach on this parable.**

Because I don't want Jesus messing with how I think about freedom. I want to be able to do what I want,  
when I want, how I want to do it.

I want my freedom to revolve around me!

Just like the rich man in our parable.  
Someone who fell into good fortune, made more money than he thought he'd make, and retired early.

He was finally FREE!!  
Or was he?

You remember what Jesus called him, right?

Not responsible. Not smart.  
Not well-prepared.

He called him a fool.

Amen.