

## Proper 13C 2019 Sermon

August 4, 2019

Luke 12:13-21 *Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And 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." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then 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. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."*

*(For this sermon, I draw heavily from the commentary on this passage by John Shea in his book *The Relentless Widow*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2006, pp. 215-219)*

If you have ever been hiking along a wooded trail and come upon a fallen tree that is decomposing, you know how life comes forth from that dead tree trunk. Moss, lichen, mushrooms and other fungi, as well as bacteria, feed on the rotting wood and thus help the natural process of decomposition, while providing food for higher life forms. All sorts of insects and their larvae, snails, slugs, and earthworms crawl around the rotting trunk. Birds and other animals come and eat the insects, worms, and slugs. In the shadow of the fallen trunk grows a new tree seedling, protected from the wind and exposure by the fallen trunk.

Creation is inherently, immensely generative and regenerative!

And starting with that fact of the abundant generativity and generosity of creation itself, Jesus tells a parable.

"The **land** of a rich man produced abundantly," Jesus begins. The earth, the land, life itself is always creating more and more – the land produces abundantly. Human effort may at times be involved, but Jesus' parable stresses at the outset the preexistent *given* of a fruitful earth -- which was *not* created by the rich man in the parable, or by you or me. I see it in my own yard: I have "volunteer" moon plants along my driveway, volunteer Virginia Creeper in my back yard, volunteer grass in my front yard, and we all know about the volunteer elm trees and dandelions that sprout up so abundantly wherever their seeds touch soil. Given the undeniable and breathtaking fact of earth's abundance, life springing forth unaided from the ground, the bumper crops which earth produces, the question for

us *ought to be*: “How should we humans **participate** in this abundance?” How should we humans **participate** in this abundance?

But this is not at all the question the rich man in our parable asks.

Rather than asking how he might participate in the abundance and creativity of God’s creation, this man *claims all* that the land produced *as his private possession*. He holds an egocentric conversation with himself, in which he uses the word “I” or “my” 11 times: ‘What should **I** do, for **I** have no place to store **my** crops?’ Then 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. And **I** will say to **my** soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

Not only is nobody else whatsoever involved in this conversation, the man actually holds a conversation with himself **within** the conversation he is already having with himself!

Fr. John Shea notes that the man thinks that his inner soul can be sustained by this outer accumulation of goods. “However, in classical thought,” writes Fr. Shea, “the soul *receives* its life from God and *gives* this life **into** the mind, body, and world. The soul lives not by possession but by *flow*.”<sup>1</sup> The soul lives not by possession but by flow.

Jesus knows that it is not *only* physical or monetary possessions that we crave and hoard. He introduces his parable by saying, “Take care! Be on your guard against **all kinds** of greed...” “Greed takes many forms,” Fr. Shea notes, “in the sense that it has many objects. It can covet money, fame, sex, compliments, power, etc. But the appetite of greed is always the same: it eats yet remains hungry. The person cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of the desired objects. They always need more; but when they *get* more, this more is not enough. So they pursue again. Greed is an endless search for more, that always leaves the searcher experiencing lack rather than fulfillment.”<sup>2</sup> Greed is an endless search for more, that always leaves the searcher experiencing lack rather than fulfillment.

Now, there is a danger for us, I believe, in the fact that the rich man in this parable is such a caricature of a greedy man. Jesus paints the man with impossibly vivid colors in order to make a point. But his intentional exaggeration should not deceive us into thinking that **we** have nothing in common with this man. The colors of *our* greed may be much more subtle, but that doesn’t make our own greedy tendencies any less real or detrimental. Fr. Shea writes, “The rich man’s inner life is no stranger to *any* of us... The dream of riches that will secure life and make us happier than we are now is built into the bones of ordinary people. We are deaf to the warnings of every spiritual tradition -- that *this* way of securing life is futile. But the warning remains: beware this false promise that is so wildly attractive.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the false promise that what we accumulate or possess will *save* us, that false promise will *eventually* be exposed by reality, sometimes sooner, sometimes later – often by our being confronted with our own inevitable death. And that is what happens in our parable, when the unbidden voice of God speaks to the rich man, saying to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” In the Christian faith, as in all great spiritual traditions, facing our own mortality and death brings our lives into proper perspective: we do not preserve our life by striving to attain – and keep – the possessions, power, or prestige of this world.

Now, it’s important to note that Jesus does not criticize the rich man for harvesting an abundant crop; the bumper crop is just a symbol of the richness, the generative power, and the generosity of creation. The *problem* lies in the rich man’s response and disposition **toward** the abundance. Like so many people in the Gospels, he asks the wrong question. He asks himself, “Where can I store all my stuff?”, thinking that hoarding the abundance of the earth as his private possession will save his soul. Instead, he should be asking, “How can I participate in this abundance of the earth?”

These two very different questions correspond to two different images. The first image is described in the parable, and corresponds to the rich man’s question, “Where can I store all my stuff?”: Visualize that image, if you will: A man tearing down his normal-sized barns, building enormous new barns in their place, and filling them full with the abundance of the earth, which he claims as his own possession.

But there is a second image which Father Shea envisions, an image which powerfully portrays that *proper* question which we earlier asked: “How should we humans **participate** in the abundance of God’s gratuitous creation?” It is an imaginative and whimsical image that may seem strange at first, but I would ask you to “go with it” and let it steep in your soul this week.

“This story,” Fr. Shea writes, “as all moral tales, ends with a lesson. You can store up treasures for yourself, thinking they will give you life. But this way of thinking and acting goes against the grain of the life you [truly] want [in the depths of your soul]. So it is a self-defeating strategy. However, there is another way. It is called ‘rich toward God.’ The [Gospel parable] does not spell it out. But I suspect part of being ‘rich toward God’... has something to do with lying on the abundant land and letting the grain grow right through your body without ever thinking of a barn.”<sup>4</sup> Lying on the abundant land and letting the grain grow right through your body without ever thinking of a barn.

Hold that image with you and live into it this week, and see if it doesn’t help you learn to participate in the abundant, divine life coursing through creation.

AMEN

- 1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2006, p. 217
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 215
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 218
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 217