

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 4, 2013

"Important Stuff."

Luke 12:13-21

A woman who lost her husband several years ago developed a friendship with a man who had also lost his spouse. They seemed a perfect match. All their children agreed they should get married. So a date was set and invitations were sent out. The invitations read like this: "Phil, Richard, Karen, Allison, John, Matt, and Steve request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their mother and father. Because they are combining two households, they already have at least two of everything. So please, no presents! Reception and garage sale immediately following the ceremony."

We do accumulate a lot of stuff nowadays, don't we? What will happen to all that stuff when we die?

Jesus was teaching one day and someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide our father's inheritance with me." Now there is a battle even Jesus didn't want to get in the middle of. Have you seen how people act when it comes to dividing up estates? Even nice people sometimes go years without speaking to their siblings because one family member got some family heirloom that someone else thought that she should get when mama's estate was divided. Sometimes these things even go to court. Such things happened in Jesus' time, too. That is why Jesus said, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"

Then Jesus decided to turn this family squabble into a teaching opportunity. He said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest..." This is an important parable. And yet, the sad truth is that most of us don't see ourselves in this story. In our eyes we're not rich and we're not foolish. Well, maybe not rich, anyway. Actually we have more in common with the rich fool than any of us like to admit. There are few of us whose lives are not dominated in one way or another by the pervasive materialism of our age. The desire of bigger houses, nicer cars, a boat, a swimming pool, a large screen television, a camper, new furniture, designer clothes--the list goes on and on.

Modern advertising is carefully designed to increase our need to acquire. We buy a certain perfume because, after all, "I'm worth it." Such advertising is even aimed at our children. Remember "Cool Shopping Barbie?" That particular doll came with her own MasterCard and cash register with a MasterCard logo on it. It even had a terminal through which Barbie could swipe her card. Of course, MasterCard has always been adept at pushing their product. Who in this room has never heard, "There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard." We know that most of the world's people do not live as we do. It bothers us and yet, like the rich ruler, we don't want to give up what we have. The last thing we need on a Sunday morning is a moralistic tirade on the sin of affluence from the pastor.

There is another problem, too. Some of us may not be as affluent as we may appear. One man was asked, "What would you do if you had all the money in the world?" He replied, "I'd apply it to all my debts as far as it would go."

Many families are in serious financial trouble today. We are told that the average American family operates just three weeks from bankruptcy. Indeed, one survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics discovered that the average family spends each year \$400 more than it earns. I wonder, who do we think we are the government? No wonder that 70 percent of all our worries these days are about money.

Someone once said, "There was a time when a fool and his money were soon parted, but now it happens to everybody." No wonder it seems like meddling when the pastor talks about money.

There are some principles in the story of the rich fool, however, that are critical to our lives. Like most of the stories that Jesus told, the emphasis here is on practical application. The rich fool had devoted his life to acquiring goods. Now it was time for him to die. What would happen to the goods? Would they go on the auction block? Could they be sold by the Wesley United Methodist Church's Estate Sale Team? Would they go to ungrateful relatives? What was the point of his life? He thought his wealth had brought him security, but it could not protect him from the grim reaper.

In the first place, we need to see that the tragic thing about this man's life was not his wealth, but his lack of commitment to anything else in life. There was nothing in the world that he was committed to except making money. All his thoughts, all his energies, all his ambitions had to do with the accumulation of wealth. Now he had come to a place where he had all the money he would ever need. What's next? Of course, more money! The tragedy of this man's life was not the abundance of his wealth but the poverty of his values. He had counted material success as the greatest goal in his life.

Did you know that the word "success" does not even appear in the Bible? The word is so important in our society. Indeed, to many persons it may be the most important word in their vocabulary. To be a financial success is their chief goal.

We often hear that money talks. Yes, that is true, usually it says good-bye. If we do not have a plan for wise management of our financial resources, our money does say good-bye to us.

The question that God asked the rich man, "Then whose will these things be?" indicates that the man had made no provisions for the disposal of his wealth after his death. It is amazing how many of us never get around to making a will. Probably we don't like to face the fact that one day we will be leaving this world's possessions behind. It is true that we cannot take it with us. If we do not plan for the disposal of our earthly possessions when we go to be with God, Uncle Sam will do it for us. Or greedy relatives will take care of the task. It might cause a few family feuds as it did in our Scripture for today.

Somebody asked, "I wonder how much money a certain billionaire left after his death?" His wise friend replied, "He left it all."

There was a rich, old man who knew that his time to die had come, so he took all his money and put it in the attic that when the times comes to go to heaven, he can take it with him on his way up. He died, and after the funeral his son went to the attic to make sure the money was gone. However, he found it and took it down to his mother, the old man's wife. When she saw all the money, she said, "I told him to put it in the basement."

It is obvious that the rich fool never discovered the joy of generosity, the joy of using his money to bring happiness to other people.

His name is not as well known as that of the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, or Andrew Carnegie, but once there was an American philanthropist named Dr. Daniel K. Pearson. Daniel Pearson had a lasting impact on colleges throughout this land. Pearson grew up in poverty. He worked his way through college, living in an attic and cooking his own frugal meals. He was a school teacher, studied medicine, and afterward was a farmer. Later he engaged in the lumber business where he was quite successful. He was blessed with a wife, of whom Dr. Pearson has said, "She wanted me to make money to give it away."

Pearson had a great knack for making money. But he didn't keep it. He used it to help young people who were struggling for an education. He provided endowments to forty-seven colleges,

particularly in Appalachia. Here is how he described his life: "I have more fun than any other rich man alive. They are welcome to their automobiles and yachts. I have discovered that giving is the most exquisite delight in the world. I intend to die penniless." And he did. He died a poor, but a happy man. By the dawn of the twentieth century Dr. Daniel K. Pearson had given away more than \$6,000,000. I can't imagine how much that would be in today's dollars. Pearson knew the joy of living for others. We can truly say that he "laid up his treasure in heaven."

You and I will probably never have six million dollars to give away, but we can learn the joy of generosity.

In the book *Believe and Belong* there is a story about a very wealthy Christian business man who was asked back to his church to speak to the Sunday school class he attended many years ago. The children were curious about this man now worth millions and asked him to tell how it all began. He said, "Well, it all began right here in church. Those were hard times. I was a young man with no job and very poor. We had a guest preacher who said, 'Give your life and all you have to Jesus and He will bless you.' I had \$3.54 in my pocket. It was all I had in the world, and I put the whole thing in the plate. I gave my life to the Lord that day and He has blessed me ever since." He closed his talk with a time for questions, and the first hand up was that of a little boy in the front row. "Mister," he said, "Could you do it now?"

Wow! there is the hard question, isn't it? It's easy to trust your resources to God when they total \$3.54, but it is different when you have millions. Perhaps that's why Jesus so often warned against the danger of wealth. It ought to be easier to tithe when we make \$80,000 a year, than when we make \$20,000 a year. But somehow it doesn't work that way, does it? Somewhere along the way our money quits serving us and we begin serving it. "Thou fool," said Jesus. Let us learn from this rich man that there is no lasting security in wealth. Let us learn the joy of generosity. Find persons with whom you can share and you will find that it is more blessed to give than receive. "What does it profit a man," Jesus asked, "if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" Amen.