

You Can't Take It With You

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, July 31, 2022.

Luke 12:13-21

“Take care!” Jesus says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” We’d like to think that Jesus’ words aren’t meant for us. After all, we’re good Christians. We’re church-going folk. We’re not greedy people. Of course, we know that our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions. Jesus must be talking about someone else. Certainly not us!

But I think if we’re really honest with ourselves, Jesus’ words are meant especially for us. If we’re not already rich, most of us think we’d like to be rich. Isn’t that the primary reason why so many people buy lottery tickets -- to have a chance at getting rich quick and joining the ranks of the wealthy? Isn’t that why there’s an audience for television shows such as “Who wants to be a millionaire?” Isn’t that why our culture is so fascinated by the “lifestyles of the rich and famous?”

And let’s not be too quick to say that we’re not ourselves among the rich. We may not be in the same league as Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, but on a global scale, as people living in the United States, most of us are among the richest people in the world. According to the Pew Research Center, if your income is more than \$50 a day, which adds up to a little more than \$18,000 a year, you are among the richest 7% of the world’s population. By contrast, the poorest 62% of the world’s population make less than \$10 a day, or less than \$4,000 a year.

Those of you who have moved recently may be particularly sensitive to the phrase “abundance of possessions.” As you know, moving entails going through all of your worldly possessions -- throwing some stuff out, giving other things away, and packing

up everything that's left. It can be disconcerting to realize just how much stuff we accumulate over the years. Susan and I moved to Albuquerque several years ago, and I still have boxes I haven't unpacked. Sometimes I long for the days when I was a young adult and all of my possessions fit into my car.

Yes, I have to admit that over the years I have accumulated an abundance of possessions. And yes, I have to admit that on a global scale, as an American, I am among the rich. So Jesus' parable of the rich fool makes me uncomfortable. It feels a little too close to home.

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly," Jesus says. "And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'" (Oh, the problems of the rich! How many of us have garages or attics full of stuff? How many of us rent storage units as well?) In fact, the rich man in Jesus' parable does have a place to store his crops. He does have barns for that purpose, but apparently they are already so full that there is not enough room to store all that his farm is producing. So, he decides to expand. He tears down his barns and builds bigger ones, large enough to store all of his grain and his goods. He is quite proud of himself. And he says to himself, "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?'" Jesus concludes with the statement: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God."

All of us must leave our worldly wealth behind when we die. "You can't take it with you," so the saying goes. Even if you could, it's not clear why you'd bother. Consider the following story:

There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel hears his plea and appears to him. “Sorry, but you can’t take your wealth with you.” The man implores the angel to speak to God to see if God might bend the rules. The man continues to pray that his wealth could follow him.

The angel reappears and informs the man that God had decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathers his largest suitcase and fills it with pure gold bars and places it beside his bed.

Soon afterward the man dies and shows up at the Gates of Heaven to greet St. Peter. Peter, seeing the suitcase, says, “Hold on, you can’t bring that in here!” But, the man explains to Peter that he has permission and asks him to verify his story with the Lord.”

Sure enough, Peter checks and comes back saying, “You’re right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I’m supposed to check its contents before letting it through.” Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, “You brought pavement?!”

Jesus’ parable of the rich fool is a tragic story, really. Here’s a man who puts a great deal of time and energy into managing his assets and saving for the future. It sounds like he’s planning for an early retirement. He’s looking forward to being a man of leisure, having the time to enjoy the fruits of his labor. But just as he is about to do so, he dies. All his plans and preparations to ensure his economic security turn out to be for naught. Prior to God calling him home, there is no indication that the man has any relationship with God whatsoever. The idea of loving and serving God doesn’t appear to be on his radar screen at all.

It is also a sad story in that the man appears to be utterly alone. Until the voice of God

breaks in, there is no one in the story except the man and his possessions. There is no mention of friends, family members, neighbors, coworkers, or the community in which he lives. He appears to be completely isolated, totally wrapped up in himself, focused single-mindedly on keeping everything he possibly can for himself. Never once does he consider sharing some of his surplus with others, giving to others in need.

And that, I think, is one of the keys to guarding against greed. As Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Or as Socrates put it: "If a man is proud of his wealth, he should not be praised until it is known how he employs it."

All of us have worked hard for what we have -- whether we've been professionals with six-figure incomes or service workers making minimum wage. But ultimately, we can't take all the credit for what we have. Many of the opportunities that come our way, or the lack of opportunities we have, are simply a product of the family we were born into -- whether we were born into a middle-class American family or a peasant farmer family in the Third World. Ultimately, all that we have comes from God. All that we have is a gift from God and is meant to be shared. And to those to whom much has been given, much will be required.

Jesus' parable ends with God speaking to the rich man: "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" It's one of those questions that reminds us of the importance of end-of-life planning, specifically planned giving. Of the abundance of possessions that we accumulate over the course of our lives—real estate, cars, furniture, jewelry, artwork, and other assets—who do we want to pass them on to when we die? Most of us want to pass things on to surviving members of our family—our spouse, siblings, children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Some of us may also wish to have donations made at the time of our death to institutions that have been important to us in our lives—a college

or university that we attended, a hospital that cared for us, an arts organization that brought us joy, a human service agency that we supported, a church community in which we were involved. If you don't already have one, it's a good idea to draw up a Last Will or Living Trust through which to make your wishes known.

A few years ago, our church created a recognition society for members and friends of St. Andrew who have made arrangements (or are considering making arrangements) to donate to the church through their Last Will, or Living Trust, or some other type of planned giving. We named it the Montgomery Circle after Earl and Lillian Montgomery, whose 1957 donation of ranchland provided St. Andrew its home. Building on the Montgomery's legacy, early St. Andrew members united to develop the church's campus and provide for the future. And today, through our Endowment Fund and our St. Andrew Mission Permanent Fund, our congregation continues to benefit from the generosity of prior generations. Brochures are on your chairs with more information about how you can support St. Andrew's mission and ministry through planned giving. I invite you to take one home with you.

Jesus teaches us that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions but in the generosity of our giving from all that we possess -- our treasure, our time, our talents. It is in giving selflessly to others that we may grow rich toward God. And we are a generous people. Thanks be to God.