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Luke 12:13-21

### CHOOSING YOUR PARABLE

I share with you a parable. There once was a woman whose husband brought her a gift of a beautifully embroidered tablecloth from one of his many journeys to distant lands. The woman was delighted with this beautiful gift and said to herself, "I will save this tablecloth to use on very special occasions." So she stored it carefully in a drawer to await the perfect occasion. Every time she had a gathering of friends at her house, the woman contemplated using the tablecloth but decided, "No, this event is not special enough. This is just an ordinary gathering of friends and neighbors. The tablecloth might get stained or the embroidery might get torn. No, I will wait for another occasion." And so the tablecloth remained well preserved in its drawer. Months passed, maybe even a year, until one day, the woman thought to herself, "What am I saving this tablecloth for? I *never* entertain kings or queens or celebrities. The people who sit down at my table are ordinary but beloved friends. If I don't share the beauty of this tablecloth with them, it will remain in the drawer and will never be used." So the woman retrieved the tablecloth from its drawer and placed it upon her table where it brought pleasure to the woman and to the many guests who admired its beauty. Over time the cloth acquired some stains, and some of the threads became frayed, and the woman noticed that it had shrunk a bit from its frequent washings. The woman realized that one day the cloth would probably no longer be fit to use. But instead of regret, she felt joy. For she discovered the pleasure that came from sharing its beauty while she could. She thought to herself, "When it is gone, I will no doubt receive something else that is lovely, and then I can use and share that while I can. For in truth, there is no end to life's beautiful gifts."

This is my parable about trying to save and preserve a blessing in my life. I wonder if you have a similar parable in your life, about something you attempt to preserve or safe-guard, some blessing or gift you are hesitant to share.

Jesus tells us a similar parable in today's reading about a rich farmer who was blessed with a bumper crop. So he decides to build bigger barns to store his grain and states, "And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." In the parable, God calls this man a "fool" not because he was wealthy but because he appears to live only for himself--he is not, as Jesus states, "rich toward God." The root problem in this story is that the man has a treasure, in this case an abundant harvest, that he intends to secure and save just for himself. We hear nothing but the word "I" from him: *I will do this, I will pull down my barns, I will store my grains, I will say to my soul.* We hear no gratitude to God for this abundant crop. We hear nothing about sharing this abundance with others. We hear nothing of what God might demand from him in the use of his resources. He is self-satisfied with what he has acquired for himself and with his plans to hoard what he has to secure his future. And he lacks any recognition that his life and all that is in it belong to God.

This parable challenges us to consider how our lives are aligned, how they are oriented: toward ourselves or toward God and neighbor. In other words: what do we do with what we have in this life, with our gifts, with our blessings, with our treasures? And when we talk about what we "have" we mean our material possessions as well as the non-material blessings we enjoy in this life--our time, our talents, our hearts, our education. What do we do with what we have? What do we do with our treasures? Do we share them? Or do we stick them in a drawer for safe-keeping? Do we build bigger barns to secure them for ourselves and our future?

Christianity is in the business of giving. Giving is a fundamental ingredient to Christianity, to living the way of Jesus Christ. If you are going to be a follower of Christ, you are called to be in the business of giving. But giving doesn't always come easily to us. And so we need one another to help us on this road to giving because it can be a challenge. I think that in Jesus' ministry, he was hoping that we might make a mental shift from an attitude that we "have to" give to an attitude that we "get to give." Think about that. We *get* to give. We get to share in the same qualities that make God so great: the quality of generosity. God is generous in love, in forgiveness, in material blessings, in bestowing upon us talents. Unlike any other creature, we have the choice to become partners with God in the act of giving. Jesus knew that giving is fundamental to our well-being. We are spiritually and emotionally healthier people when we give. We are more fully human when we give. And other people are clearly better off when we share what we have. What would it take in your life for giving to shift from "have to" to "get to"?

I invite you to think about the many blessings you know in your life. In this moment of brief silence, think about the things you would count as blessings. (silence) What was on your list of blessings? Was it family, or health, or financial well-being? Did you think of your many skills and talents? Or maybe your education? Or the love you know from others or from God? Or your capacity to love others? Now, think of all these blessings, these treasures in your life, and think of how you can give them away to others. I can think of no blessing we might know in life that cannot be shared. Think about the blessing of family. I know families that continually expand the boundaries of what constitutes "family," who invite others to join them in family events, who "adopt" grown people and make them part of their family. Your health can be shared in millions of ways through the gift of your time. Your talents can be shared. Your love

can be shared. Your joy can be shared. Your forgiveness can be shared. Your money can be shared. Your home can be shared. All these blessings are ours to give away. Just give them away. There is no value in preserving our treasures for ourselves. Ours is a ministry of giving.

It is true, however, that when giving of ourselves or our material possessions that we may find ourselves dented, scratched, and stained. Our hearts may become dented, scratched, or stained by others we try to love or serve. Our bodies may become dented, scratched, or stained from our efforts to serve God and our neighbor. Our possessions may be dented, scratched, or stained as we use and share them. There are costs associated with giving our lives and sharing our gifts. When we look at the life of Jesus it is fair to say that he got dented, scratched, and stained in his efforts to share his gifts of love, forgiveness, and a new life to all of us. But Jesus understood that giving is really the only pathway to our knowing a meaningful life. When we are fortunate, we may know great joy in giving and sharing. But even when joy does not follow, even when sharing our love is rebuffed by another, even when striving to forgive is met with rejection, even when our gifts are not warmly received by others, even when joy does *not* follow, there is still great meaning and purpose to be found in our efforts to give for we will be walking the way of Jesus Christ, we will be living as those who are rich toward God.

Today is Rally Day when we resume the church program year. It is a good occasion to reconsider our purpose as a congregation and our various ministries. As followers of Jesus, we are in the business of giving ourselves away. We are in the business of using our treasures in serving God and neighbor. What are our treasures? We have this building. We have some financial well-being made possible by the giving of people of faith past and present. We have loving hearts. We have talented members with skills and abilities. We have the good news of Jesus Christ which teaches us that we are loved, forgiven, and raised to new life, which teaches

us that all people are God's precious children to be treated with love, compassion, and justice. These are just some of some of our many treasures--not to be stored, saved, or safe-guarded but shared.

After worship, we will proceed downstairs to dedicate the three newly renovated rooms and lift. It's been a year long process to renovate those rooms for our use after we gave up space for the expansion of Best Self Behavioral Health. Through this year we endured all the headaches that come with a renovation but now those spaces are done, and are lovely, and are ready for our use. Those rooms are new, and fresh, and beautiful. They are our treasure. And they are ready for us to share. They stand ready for us to give away in serving God and neighbor. In doing so, they will no doubt become dented, scratched, and stained in various ways. That's what happens when we use our treasures. But treasures, treasures are for sharing. Our faith teaches us not just that we "have to share" but that we "get to share."

A seasoned pastor once said, "I have heard many different regrets expressed by people nearing the end of life, but there is one regret I have never heard expressed. I have never heard anyone say, 'I wish I hadn't given so much away. I wish I had kept more for myself.'"

There is another parable waiting to be told about your life and mine. It is a parable about a people who took the treasures stored in their drawers and barns and houses, they took the treasures stored in their hearts and minds, they took the treasures stored in their bank accounts and wallets and church buildings, and they shared. And they gave and they gave and they gave. And in giving they discovered how rich they were.