

“A Word to the Short-Sighted Ones”

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.”

If you have ever witnessed a squabble over an inheritance, it is a hot mess. With the raw ingredients of grief, family history, and the differences of opinion about who deserves what, it can be a hot and hurtful mess. We have heard of relationships being fractured. Lawsuits have been waged. Families torn apart. Turn to our story and we get squabbling brothers who want Jesus to settle their dispute over what they believe is rightfully theirs. They are hoping he will take sides. But instead, Jesus just says, “Dude, I’m not your judge...” and he turns the sibling rivalry into a teachable moment. All this energy, all this time, all the desire...all of it wasted on stuff! He says, “Your life does not consist of stuff!”

At the outset, what do we make of his words? Do we agree with him? If we take a wide-angle point-of-view, we would probably say Jesus is absolutely right on. But if we take notice of the everyday minutia of our lives, somehow, we end up collecting more and more. If you’ve ever moved, isn’t it amazing how much stuff we collect over the years? Or maybe we were in charge of a parent’s estate. And after they are gone, we go through closets and attics sifting through a bunch of their belongings, wondering why they held onto all this stuff. It seems our lives do consist of stuff! If you’re anything like me, you love a good dopamine hit. I tell myself, “Self, you live only once, so might as well make the most of it!” Eat, drink, and be merry! And why not? Except, when we pan out to a wider perspective we begin to notice where it is we are borrowing this desire from. When Jesus makes his comment about our lives not consisting of stuff, on the surface at least, we would all agree with him. But when we look closer at how we live day to day...perhaps the jury is still out.

But here’s where things get interesting. Jesus tells a story: the land of a rich person produced a bumper crop. So the rich dude decides to build bigger barns. At first, we might judge him as being greedy, but really it’s a smart business strategy. After all, what happens to crop prices during a bumper crop year? When the supply goes up, the prices go down! My brother-in-law is a farmer, and he says they actually prefer to NOT have bumper crop years because it drives the value of the crop down. So being an opportunist, the rich guy says to himself, “I know what I’ll do, I’ll store the crop away until a drought year. That way, then the supply is low the prices will be high, and I’ll be able to make more money.” It appears he has enough foresight to be playing

the long game. Like the oil companies, who are making record profits as we pay \$4 per gallon. They know we will pay bucko bucks during drought seasons. We may hear that it is because of Russia or whose president, but they are smart business people who are playing the long game. The rich dude is smart. He has a plan. And it appears he has some foresight.

Except, what happens? His plug gets pulled! God says, “You fool...” and in the Greek we can probably best understand it as “You short-sighted twit!” This rich guy thought he was playing the long game, but he couldn’t see beyond himself—beyond his own needs and comforts—and now what happens when his life is gone?” What is going to happen to all that crop in great big storage bins? Answer: it’s going to rot. Jesus is saying: be careful. Greed can take on many forms. And this is how it is over and over again for those who can’t see beyond themselves. It appears the rich guy in the story is playing the long game, but Jesus is saying, “the guy is actually being a short-sighted twit.”

So here’s a question: how does the church—including ours—refocus its lens to seeing beyond themselves? I mean, what happens when we can’t see beyond our own needs? Or how about the anxiety we have about the future? It is easy to forget that the church does not primarily exist for the benefit of itself. Now I’m not saying the church never offers charity and services and strives to do the best we can in the world. I’m not saying we don’t have programs which can take our resources and use them for the sake of helping other people. No. What I am wondering out loud, is how often churches get in their own way, because they can’t see beyond their own comfort, or control, or worries about the future. And what happens is we get sucked into a mode of self-protection, and we stop trusting that God will take care of us. So you see, we are free to be bold. We are free to be generous. We are free from the anxiety about what’s going to happen if we do x, y, or z, because we can see beyond ourselves.

There is a big clue in the first sentence of the story Jesus tells which I’ve always missed. It says, “The land of a rich man produced abundantly.” Did you hear it? What is the subject of the sentence? Hint: it’s not the rich dude. It’s the land! You see, we somehow fool ourselves into believing that what the land has produced is rightfully ours. But our inheritance is the blessing bestowed on all of creation. And here’s the catch: it will cease to be a blessing if we aren’t willing to share it.

Recently, our leaders voted to become a Matthew 25 church, a PCUSA initiative, which means we are working toward: congregational vitality, ending racism, and dismantling systems which hold people in poverty. They are lofty goals, but they are trying to help the church to see beyond itself. So perhaps we will keep practicing our Spanish: to help us see beyond ourselves. And in doing so, hopefully we will continue to store up peace, and justice, and joy.

“Your life does not consist of stuff. So be careful,” Jesus says, “Because greed can take on many forms of short-sightedness.” So, we look around at all we have. We are so blessed, aren’t we? The blessing is our inheritance. But it will only remain a blessing as long as we have the foresight and the humility to share it. Amen.