

Sermon for August 4, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Ps. 107; Luke 12: 13-21
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Rich Toward God

Jesus Christ, let these words be your words and your words alone. Amen.

Our son, Joseph, graduated from Auburn in 2002, and fairly quickly landed his first professional job here in Huntsville, complete with a good salary and benefits, much to his parents' delight. He found a comfortable apartment that, for the first time in his life, he could afford without a roommate, and he bought his dream car, a used bright red Toyota MR2. He even began a serious relationship with a beautiful young woman from England. Everything was as it should be in preparation for the American Dream and the building of barns.

Then, perhaps a year into his work, Joseph announced he felt called to become a Peace Corps Volunteer, emphasis on the word "volunteer." It would be a minimum two-year commitment. We knew that had been something niggling in the back of his mind during college, and we supported him, but to be honest, we were also concerned about his economic future and being out of his field that long. Knowing he had been very blessed with his current employment, we hoped he would change his mind and keep his well-paid 9-5 job, the red Toyota MR2, the girlfriend, and volunteer locally. But Joseph couldn't do it. He gave it all up: the job, the apartment, the beloved car, and eventually the serious girlfriend who sent him a Dear John letter a month after he left the country. His barn was empty.

Hoping to go to South America, and even enrolling in some Spanish classes, Joseph was, of course, assigned to Kenya where Spanish isn't really spoken much. The first three months he was there, he was housed with a host family, a widowed mother and her teenage son and daughter, while he studied his new language, Swahili, and acclimated to the culture of living in a mud hut with sporadic electricity and no running water in a little village where goats and chickens wandered in and out of homes.

On the first night of his arrival, his new family honored their house guest by presenting Joseph with a prized dish: a goat liver. A raw goat liver. To them, it was the best they had to offer and a sacrifice. Joseph knew it would be rude to offend the widow, so he managed to get one bite down and then, in a brilliant move, insisted that her son, the real man of honor, should have the rest.

My husband and I had the chance to visit Joseph while he was there. By that time, he had been in Kenya over a year and had helped a group of women develop an egg co-op. The

women pooled their chickens, built chicken coops, and together sold their eggs, all for the sake of caring not for themselves or their children, but for the village children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic.

When they heard that we were visiting, the women, called “Mamas,” insisted on fixing us lunch, a feast with chicken, sweet potatoes, something like rice, greens, and bread, much more than we had expected and much more than they needed to be sharing. Whatever had been stored in their barns was now on the table.

In each of these instances, from giving up everything to move to another country to serve, to the gift of a goat liver, to selling eggs to care for someone else’s child, to feeding the stranger, we see what it means to be rich toward God instead of simply being rich. *It means to notice the dignity in each and every person, no matter race, country of origin, or social status, and to share whatever we have been given.*

Unfortunately, the man in today’s parable missed that opportunity. Apparently, this man worked very hard. He is a man who is successful. He is a man who is rich with an abundance of wheat and who cleverly plans for the future. He is a man living our version of the American Dream: eat, drink, and be merry. Nowhere does Jesus rebuke these attributes or the man’s wealth, for it isn’t a crime or a sin to be rich. But it is also clear that Jesus knows what’s in this man’s heart: the man, not God.

Instead of talking to his wife, or a friend, or a son or daughter, this man is chatting with himself. Instead of thanking God for all he has received, this man informs his soul of his plan to keep what he’s got. Instead of laying up the harvest in order to provide for his wife, or a friend, or a son or a daughter, or sharing it with those who have less, his planning is all about himself, and his focus is only on himself. “I” and “my,” not “we” and “theirs,” are the pronouns he uses, missing the point that all he has comes from God, the same God who is sovereign over his life.

The last decision this man makes in his life is about his own ability to eat, drink and be merry; not anyone else’s. He shows no concern for family, for community, for the stranger, for anyone at all. What he fails to realize until it is too late is that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” His tragedy is not that he died too soon, but that he didn’t do anything that mattered with the gifts he had right in front of him. His heart, like his barns, was too full of himself.

This particular parable flies in the face of our own culture where we are taught to achieve the American Dream, where we have so many possessions that we need attics and have to rent storage units, where “Keeping Up with the Joneses” and “Being Number One” are our mantras, where there is an undercurrent of fear that the “other” person is out to get what is ours. It is an unsettling parable for the affluent, for so many of us who have honestly earned what we have and worked hard to get it. Remember, Jesus doesn’t

condemn the man for being rich; he is called a Fool because he centers his life around his possessions.

This uncomfortable parable invites us, if we want to listen to it, to examine our own lives to see what it is we are storing up in our barns. It may not be money at all. But perhaps the things we don't want to share are just as important, or even more important, than money. Maybe it's those talents God has given us that we promise ourselves we will use and share next week, next month, next year. Or maybe it's our personal time that we hoard, but how much do we really need? Perhaps God keeps stirring our hearts with a concern or a passion, something that we need to speak out against, or someone we need to speak up for, or an action we know as disciples we are called to take, but our barns are full of our comfort zones and our excuses.

Or here's another thought, since where our treasures lie our hearts will also be. Do we fill our barns with resentment and grudges that last a lifetime? Do we need to build another barn to house our political views and our self-righteous sense of offense when others disagree with us? What about the barns full of our judgments of others, especially those different from us, those from different faiths, different backgrounds, different countries? Or are our barns filled with our opinions, our agendas, our preferences, our wants, our expectations, sounding like the Rich Fool with all his "me," "my," and "I" pronouns? Perhaps it's time to examine what is in our barns, yours and mine, what is in our hearts, and how much we really treasure what we find there. Perhaps it's time to ditch some things in order to make room for others and for God.

Let me end with a final story about Kenya. Joseph, Dennis, and I were in a jeep bound for safari on a Sunday. We passed a group of about twenty people—men, women, children—all barefoot and all dressed in immaculate white while dancing down a dirt road. They were carrying banners and singing. I asked Joseph if this was some kind of holiday or parade, and he replied, "No, they are just going to church. That's the way they do it. It's a celebration."

Imagine. A celebration. A thanksgiving. Going to church without shoes. Living in a mud hut. Caring for orphaned children. Have so little, but having enough to be thankful for and enough to share. Praising God with joy and remembering who is the greatest giver of all: the One who gave all he had to give, his own son. Our possessions can't save us. In the end, our opinions don't matter. Life is short and each one is held by a thread. What we do and who we are and how we impact God's kingdom now is what matters and what determines how rich we are toward God. Thanks be to God.