



'Build Smart'

Lectionary 18 – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
8:15 & 11:00 am, July 31, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-12;](#)
[Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The most recent art show at New York City's New Museum of Contemporary Art is called "The Keeper." It is a fascinating display of collections. I guess you would say the show is a collection of collections! It contains all kinds of things that people have a passion for collecting. (Of course, there's a fine line between collecting and hoarding.) Some of the collections display valuable items; others are valueless, though perhaps priceless in the eye of their particular beholder-collector. Novelist Vladimir Nabokov collected and mounted butterflies. Artist Ydessa Hendeles amassed 3,000 family album photographs of people and their teddy bears.

The exhibition prompted *The New York Times* to invite readers to respond by confessing what they collect. And respond they did—the woman who kept the contents of her vacuum cleaner bags for a year, then looked through that contents as a kind of diary of the year's events; the couple that collects novelty pens (they have somewhere between 300-500 of them); the family with 10,700 colored paper clips displayed on the walls of their home.

Art Critic Jonathan Jones mused about this exhibition and the subsequent confessions of collectors. He suggested that collecting large numbers of the same item seems to be a way for people to surround themselves with "reassuring familiarity." (Jonathan Jones, "Hoarders or Collectors? Our Frightened Society Has Forgotten the Difference," *The Guardian*, 7/27/16)

I don't know about that psychology stuff, but perhaps there is a sense where saving things, collecting things, even hoarding things, is a way for us to feel secure and content in a very insecure, discontented world. (Disclaimer: You should know that a friend gave me a can of colored paper clips last year. I really like them. Don't display them on the walls of my home, but I also haven't used any from the can yet. I just keep the can of 'em ...)

But I digress. I think it's fair to say that the character of the rich man in Jesus' parable we heard today would have been most comfortable in that art exhibit. For he would have seen a mirror image of himself—this one who derives a feeling of security and contentment in the gathering of vast amounts of grain and goods he has housed in ever-bigger barns. There he looks out upon his collection of material stuff with all its "reassuring familiarity" and says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

So does the art critic Jonathan Jones have something here? Would he see that rich man as someone who is actually fearful about the world, life in general, and his future, and actually so worried about possible scarcity, that he would devote all his energy to hoarding everything he has grown and produced, storing it away for himself in order to protect himself, and then, and only then, feel at peace? Hmm.

Except it was a short-lived peace, wasn't it? For, as Jesus continues telling the parable, we learn that the rich man dies that very night, and everything he had, everything he thought was his to keep and enjoy—why, all of it went to someone else.

You know, it was often Jesus' pattern to offer a parable when asked a direct question. It's helpful for us to note what led Jesus to tell this story. There was a man in the crowd who called out to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Jesus refused to be the mediator between the two brothers. Instead, Jesus warned against greed, reminding the man this: "...one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Note that Jesus doesn't label either of the brothers as "greedy." But he does warn about the need to watch against the ways greed and selfishness impact our lives.

Think for a moment about that brother. He doesn't ask Jesus a question about eternal life. He doesn't ask about God's purpose for creation. He doesn't ask what the greatest commandment is. He doesn't ask how he might become a disciple. The man wants Jesus to resolve a financial dispute between this man and his own flesh and blood brother. So it's pretty clear that God and his kingdom aren't at the center of this man's life right now. And it's pretty clear that a good, healthy relationship with his brother and a willingness to reconcile differences isn't at the center of this man's life either. Show me the money. He wants the money. That's his center. That's what drives him.

And that's when Jesus begins to tell the parable of the rich man who built bigger and bigger barns for his stuff. Whether this brother recognizes any similarity between himself and the character of the rich man is uncertain. But you can read in the dialogue—er, I mean, monologue—of the rich man, and you see what is at the center of his life as well. The rich man talks to himself: "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" He even answers himself (and so one must wonder whether he has any family or friends or mutually-caring relationships): "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."

Do you see how foolish the rich man is? He thinks everything he has is his, made by his own hands. He does not realize everything he has is gift from God. And that life itself is gift from God. He is like the seagulls in the movie "Finding Nemo" who only utter one word: "Mine. Mine. Mine."

When we do not see our possessions as gifts given to us, or when we rely only on ourselves, or when we work only for our own interests, then our belongings and our bank accounts and our very beings become our center. And the fear of losing those things drives us and all our actions. We yearn for that "reassuring familiarity" of the stuff that we have. We feel secure and content when surrounded by all our stuff. But as the end of this parable indicates, what our amassed collections give us is a security and peace that is false. You can't take it with you! And those things we just "gotta have" often get in the

way of our good relationships with God and neighbor—true treasures from the hand of God.

The writer Florence Ferrier tells a story about a social worker in poverty-stricken Appalachia. The social worker was visiting a family named the Sheldons. They were a large family in serious financial trouble. Yet, with some help and creativity, they managed to eke out a living, and did so without complaint. During one of her visits, the social worker was handed a jar of bear meat. Mr. Sheldon had managed to shoot the bear, and the meat had been processed in all the big canning jars they could scrounge. The social worker, knowing their need, hesitated to accept the gift. Mr. Sheldon said firmly, "Now you just have to take this. We want you to have it. We don't have much, that's a fact; but we ain't poor!" She wondered aloud about this distinction, and Mr. Sheldon explained, "When you give something away, even when you don't have much, then you ain't poor. When you don't feel easy giving something away even if you got more'n you need, then you're poor, whether you know it or not." Do you see? Mr. Sheldon's possessions were not his center.

Jesus concludes by telling the brother to be "rich towards God." In other words, let God and our relationship with him be our center, our priority. Let all good things be seen by us as blessings extravagantly given to us by our gracious and loving God. With God as our center, when there is this "reassuring familiarity" with God, we'll trust that our needs will be met. We'll discover it is not necessary to hoard our collections away in bigger barns. Instead, like Mr. Sheldon, we'll share out of our abundance, and become blessings for others. **AMEN.**

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