

“Myths of Scarcity”  
Text: Luke 12:13-21  
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Some years ago, a men’s church group was meeting early in the morning for breakfast and Bible Study in the church fellowship hall. They had been studying the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and had come to the story that we just heard, usually called the parable of the Rich Fool. After they finishing reading the story, there was silence in the room for what seemed like an eternity. No one sipped coffee, no one lifted a bagel from a plate. Most stared at the table in front of them. Finally, one of the men began the discussion. "You know", he said, "the teachings of Jesus are just so hard to understand. I mean, these stories and parables that he told. How are we to understand what he meant?" Again, there was silence in the room until finally another man, the oldest in the group, raised his voice: "Bill, you know that is not true. The teachings of Jesus are not hard to understand. They are hard to follow."

The teachings of Jesus are not hard to understand, they are hard to follow. This week we are confronted with one of the most difficult and direct stories that Jesus ever told. On top of that, the story concerns one of the most uncomfortable topics in many churches today: the issue is wealth, and what our possessions say about us.

While it may be hard to believe given the general silence of the church on the topic, Jesus had more to say about wealth, money, and possessions than on any other topic other than the kingdom of God.

Many commentators have noted the ways in which Luke's version of the life of Jesus stands alone among the four gospels in emphasizing those teachings of Jesus that strongly and repeatedly feature God's partiality for the humble, the lowly, the poor, and those who are considered unworthy or unclean by dominant culture. It is Luke who preserves the teachings of Jesus that tell of God's disdain for those who are selfish in their wealth, the powerful, those who claim to be self-sufficient, and the proud. Think of the stories Luke tells. This author alone tells us that Jesus was born in a stable, cradled in a feeding trough, and was visited by the humblest of men, the shepherds. Only Luke tells about the foolishness of the prodigal son who wanted everything now and who found ruin as the only return for his greediness. It is only in Luke’s Gospel that we hear Mary sing to God despite her lowly status, and God’s presence with her rather than the powerful and rich.

No wonder liberation theologians and those who emphasize social justice and Christian outreach focus so intently on Luke's Gospel. It is a good word for us. We who can be lured into believing that we rely only on ourselves, that we no longer need God.

Luke's story is a good word for us, because the culture we live in emphasizes consumption and consumerism above all else. Many sociologists point to the ways in which the continually narrowing focus on the individual is impacting every part of life in America today. This focus threatens to undo the communal bonds that hold us together because it turns neighbors into competitors. The idea behind the consumer-culture is that there will never be enough to go around, that I must work harder, faster, and longer than anyone else and therefore secure a larger part of the limited resources that exist. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of just a little more. This worldview, which reduces every part of life, including other human beings, to a commodity is what Old Testament Theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the myth of scarcity. Further, Dr. Brueggemann defines this myth as a form of idolatry that tames and constrains the church. That is, when the church succumbs to this consumerist mentality, then we become foolish idolators who follow the ways of the world rather than the ways of Christ. I believe Dr. Brueggemann is on to something. Is it not true that we continue to operate from an assumption of scarcity? There is never enough to go around and therefore we must continue to produce, continue to work harder than our competitors, so that we may continue to consume and accumulate more and more.

This is the myth of scarcity. The myth of scarcity insists that there is never enough time to get all the work done, let alone take time to help another. The myth of scarcity says that there is not enough food for all in the world to be fed. The myth of scarcity insists that we must fight and destroy in order to protect what is ours. The myth of scarcity tells us that it is not our job to take care of others, because this is a dog-eat-dog society and if you do not buy in you will be left out. The myth of scarcity had even invaded the American churches, warning us that we have to hold on tightly to our salvation and to our God because if just anyone can be saved or worship God than there won't be enough to go around. The myth of scarcity has a strangle hold on our society.

A man approached Jesus on the road and asked him to help with an argument over inheritance. But behind that question, Jesus sensed the myth of scarcity at work. And so rather than act as arbitrator, Jesus told a story.

There are only two characters in this story: a man who has acquired great wealth and God, who appears in the middle of the night as a harbinger of death. We would call this man a success, a prudent business person. He does not acquire wealth by illegal or immoral means. His land simply produces abundantly, and the man works to secure his future. He is what we might call "a big shot", "a high roller", one of the privileged few at the top of the economic power structure. And yet Jesus calls him "fool", because his life is constrained by myths of scarcity.

The first, and clearest myth is that he can never have enough material possessions. The rich man must build larger and larger barns...but at what point are the barns large enough? When they dwarf the surrounding buildings, so that he can no longer see those in need standing outside? Once, a newspaper reporter asked John D. Rockefeller, "how much money is enough? Rockefeller smiled and chuckled a little, and answered, "Just a little more." That is the myth of scarcity The rich man believes that more possessions

bring greater security, and so he builds larger barns. This parable has long stood as a warning against greed. Many sermons have been preached emphasizing the greediness and insatiability of the man. Certainly, this makes sense especially with the statement that forms the introduction to the story: be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Greed is clearly a part of this parable. But as I read this fascinating story, I find something deeper than greed in the one often referred to as the rich fool.

Think again about the parable. An intriguing element of this story is that while the man and God are introduced, no other person besides the rich man himself is mentioned. The majority of the dialogue consists of the rich man talking to himself. He even addresses his own soul as if it is a conversation partner. In all, the soliloquy contains sixty words, and twelve of them are “I” and “my”. It is as if he has lost the capacity to see other human beings. This is the second myth of scarcity that dominates the rich fool: the myth of self-sufficiency. Certainly his land does not produce abundantly without hired help. Certainly he will not tear down and build barns without the assistance of others. And yet, the rich man’s focus is entirely on himself. He talks as though he could plow the fields and build the barns alone. Lying behind his visible outward greed, the rich man is guilty of self-absorption—the belief that he can get by on his own, without anything from anyone. He lived in his own world for himself, with himself, and by himself. He was as poor communally as he was rich materially.

But the foolishness of the man is even deeper than mere egotism. Living under these first two myths of scarcity leads to the third: the myth that tells us that God does not act in the world. The myth that God is unconcerned with human affairs and that we are left to ourselves. Psalm 53 begins with this interesting little verse: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There isn’t a God’ (Psalm 53:1).” Jesus knew his psalms, and a fool in Psalm 53 is anybody who lives as if God were not. And Jesus has called this businessman a fool. Is there a connection between the atheistic fool of the Psalms and this materialistic fool in Luke? A link is being made between our idolatry and our materialism, our godlessness and our greed.

The rich man says, ‘Soul, take ease.’”

But ease is precisely what he cannot take in his situation. His life is condemned to ceaseless striving, a treadmill of desire. “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind,” says Emerson. Things are a demanding deity. The human mind, wrote John Calvin, is a permanent factory of idols. The rich fool worships his wealth, and this is what earns him the title of fool. Isn’t it interesting that when God confronts this man the man makes no response or any attempt to justify himself. What could he say? He was so completely surprised that he would have to answer to God that he is speechless. The chattering fool is silenced in the presence of the God whose very existence he denied by his lifestyle. The myth of scarcity, that there is not enough for everyone and therefore what I have I must keep and what I don’t I must accumulate, leads only to death. Though the man’s physical life is taken from him, he had given his inner life and light away long ago.

Jesus tells this story in response to a question about the division of inheritance. It stands as a warning to all those who seek to live according to the myths of scarcity. It stands as a warning to people and corporations today who live according to those same myths..

But it is not the only way to live. Jesus gives us another choice in the familiar words that follow this passage. Immediately after telling this grim parable, he turns to his disciples with these words: He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.”

This is the truth of abundance. The truth is that the world is full of the abundance of God. The truth is that God has given humanity all the resources necessary for abundant life. But God has not distributed these resources, instead that task has been left up to us.

The truth of abundance is that we can and must rely on God, and on one another. It was in his sermon on this passage that Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “In a real sense all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality”. This is the beloved community about which the rich fool knew nothing.

The truth of abundance is that God is in control, that God is alive and active in the world. That God is still sovereign over us and cares for the world.

This week I was visiting a woman at Metro State Prison who I have spent a great deal of time with over the past eight weeks. She is in isolation twenty-three hours per day, and spends her one hour outside in a metal cage with razor wire on both sides. She has recently received news that her son will be taken away by the state and, as I sat with her, she spoke of her hopelessness and despair in the face of so much pain. When it was time for me to go, I asked if we could pray together. She responded that she would like to pray this time and began to speak candidly with God. She prayed for herself, that God would grant her serenity and peace and that God would make a way out of no way for her. She prayed for her son and the rest of her family. But as she continued to pray, I noticed a change in her petitions. She was praying for me and the other chaplains at Metro. She was praying for the guards and counselors and administrators who work at the prison. She was praying for homeless children in Atlanta and AIDS orphan in Sub-Saharan Africa. She was praying for the powerful and for the powerless. Her prayers reached the ends of the earth and the cell next door. When she had closed her prayer, I asked her how she felt. Chaplain, she said, I feel a peace. It always helps me to pray for other people. Because they are just like me. They need God to work in their lives. You know, Chap, when God is all you have...you realize that God has all you need. And I said, “Amen.”