

I.

So this Bible story – tough stuff huh? Is anyone else a little uncomfortable? My friend Tyler, who gives us some advice on how to organize our finances, says we are doing a pretty good job on our saving. We're really focusing on laying up goods for the future. Is that a problem? Should I be concerned? Well, I think I should be concerned because money, of all the things of this world, has a strong tendency to be idolized. As this parable points out, there is reason to be concerned when it comes to the accumulation of wealth.

There's some tearing down and building up bigger in this parable and that hits a little close to home too. This is Atlanta, GA after all and we know a little about tearing down and building up bigger. Tearing down little houses and building up bigger ones; bigger stadiums, malls, skyscrapers, roads, airports. We've got so much; too much for some folks and not enough for others and so we've got to tear down and put up some bigger. "Take care," Jesus warns, "be on your guard against *all* kinds of greed."

In these warm summer days we like to take time to relax, hopefully enjoy a few days away from work, put a dent in Netflix queue backlog. Eat, drink, and be merry. We probably don't want to have to think about money. Stewardship season is still weeks away and here we have a parable in Luke's gospel that forces us into the highly uncomfortable topic of how we Christians view our abundance of resources. This is one of those parables that you can pretty much let speak for itself. It's brilliant and clear storytelling on Jesus' part. But that makes me wonder, what else is loaded in this compact little parable?

Before we get too far into this thing, let me make something clear. The basic point of this is a simple and fundamental truth. It's so simple that it almost seems silly to even point out. I think it's the heart of Reformed Christianity, which is what Presbyterianism is. Yet, our propensity to miss this fundamental truth and in fact run in the opposite direction, gives warrant to pointing it out. It's this: that our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions; rather our lives, our very existence, consists in our receiving and responding to the abundance of God's unmerited grace towards us. God loves every one of God's creations, has claimed us, has already forgiven us for a lifetime of messing up, and has saved us. And so now we get to live lives of freedom – freedom from sin, from the pressure to prove ourselves and our worth by our performance and possessions, from the anxious pursuit of empty soul crushing pleasures and instead share our lives, our gifts, our resources, and the good news of Jesus Christ with those in desperate need of all of the above. The God who created us in God's own image loves us from birth through death, not based on our success in our jobs or our ability to make a buck or our how many friends we have or how many likes our pictures get on Instagram, but God loves us at every point of our lives because God made us and we are God's. It's the grace of God that gives us life and gives our lives value and meaning. That's it. We need to keep coming back to this simple fundamental truth because life is really, really hard sometimes and we go through really tough patches and have to make tough choices. We can become

distracted and forget this reality, so it bears repeating: your value and mine comes from how much God loves us; the Grace of God. That's it.

II.

This is what Jesus is teaching the crowds in the moments before he is interrupted by someone in the crowd. He's teaching grace to the thousands of people – the anxious, sweaty, crowd of people, pushing and falling and trampling on one another to get closer to Jesus. He's telling this stressed out, overworked, and worry prone, crowd of folks just like us not to be afraid anymore. "Not even one sparrow is forgotten in God's sight," he tells them, "Even the hairs of your head are all counted, so don't be afraid." He's telling them the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is bolstering their confidence in the event they face persecution for standing up for the oppressed and the vulnerable in society in his name. He's giving them courage to trust that if they are arrested and dragged before the authorities to answer for their truth telling, the Holy Spirit will teach them what they ought to say. In the text right before our passage, Jesus is laying out some pretty heavy stuff and it's hot and they are pushing in on him, and somebody keeps stepping on the back of his sandal, and they are screaming as they are stepping, trampling, over each other, but this news is so good, so important they have to be there to hear it themselves, and Jesus is on a roll, he's hitting his stride, he's fired up, the Spirit is moving and then – "Teacher!" What? "Um, teacher! Excuse me Teacher." There's this someone in the crowd, this man shouting out over the tired, poor, huddled masses of people yearning to breathe free the fresh air of Jesus' word of grace and peace. He shouts out to the teacher, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Jesus seems taken aback. His response is terse, biting: "Man, who made me your executor?"

This is a big distraction for Jesus. It's a distraction for the people seeking to be close to Jesus. It's a distraction from that community building work that demands leaving behind distractions like the pursuit of greater wealth. It's a distraction that is deeply rooted, not in the simple possession of wealth but greed. We have some lawyers here. Y'all might have some idea of the damage this kind of thing – greed – can have on a family, a business, a whole community – the bickering over inheritance, over property, money and stuff. Just look at our whole political system. Distracted – anxious, fearful, and obsessed with money.

This man waded into a pulsing throng of poor, sick, desperate people seeking the presence of the God in flesh and this man was so distracted by his own issues that he's blind to the creation altering event unfolding in his presence, the Kingdom of God right here on earth.

Jesus takes this distraction and turns it into a teaching moment. Just like in life, this self-centered greed consistently tries to interrupt the primary focus on living in the love, the justice, and the grace of Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "See, this is what you have to take care to avoid: greed of all kinds. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

So what does it consist of? That's the question I'm left asking.

III.

Jesus tells a story. It's a story about the exact wrong way to follow Jesus, the opposite of how you should live in the world. It's a story about a fool. Maybe he doesn't seem so foolish at the beginning when you think about it. He's just a successful farmer

who had a good harvest this year. The text doesn't tell us he was a cruel farmer who mistreated workers, it doesn't tell us he stole or cursed or was abusive. He was just good at what he does. What's so wrong with that?

On a Sunday morning in Chicago back in August of 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached on this very passage. He said that this man was a fool "because he allowed the means by which he lived to out distance the ends for which he lived."¹ In other words, the goods he had accumulated, this fruitful harvest, was more important than the reason for which he live – that is to participate fully in God's work of bringing about a just community. Dr. King said, "he didn't participate in civil rights." He forgot he was part of a community that helped him get where he is today and might have some issues themselves. You see, this man, much like that someone in the crowd, was distracted. This man was focused completely on himself, his own success, his own comfort, and he was oblivious, indifferent, or downright callous to a larger community and needs they might have. His neighbor down the road never got his irrigation system working so his crop failed. That new refugee family in town that helped him with the harvest doesn't have enough quality food of their own. Those kids across the street need some help with homework after school. He was a fool because, surrounded by abundance, he only thought of himself. He talks only to himself, asks himself questions, debates with himself, congratulates himself, and comforts himself. He's like someone standing in a crowd in the presence of Jesus Christ asking a question about some family heirlooms. The man can think of no one to thank and no one to share with. He's a self-made, independent, pulled himself up by his bootstraps man who can only now say to his soul, let's kickback, relax, eat good food, and drink good wine from now on, however long that might be. Then God speaks. "You fool. Your time isn't very long. In fact you're dying tonight. And what about all your plans? What about all your stuff? Where will that go?" The question asked by the author of Ecclesiastes is a good one for the man: "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" In light of this sudden change in plans all that hard work to just store up goods seems a bit like vanity, chasing after the wind. But what if we worked hard, toiled under the sun for our years we have and did so out of our gratitude to God for the blessings of this existence. What if we worked so that we might contribute not just towards our comfort but towards improving the quality of life of others in our community? What if we relaxed because we are finally assured that our value comes not from abundance of possessions and our success at work but from God's love of us and of our neighbors, some of whom have more than us and most of whom have much less.

What if that someone in the crowd looked around and noticed he was in the presence of other broken, hurting people desperate for the love of Christ. What if he looked around and realized that he was part of the crowd not somehow above it, more special, more deserving, entitled to something. What if he stopped being distracted and stopped being a distraction and started helping out those in the crowd. What if instead of saying, "tell my brother to share," he had said, "tell my brother the good news of your love for him regardless of his wealth or poverty." What if we, the distracted someone's in

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Why Jesus Called This Man a Fool," Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, August 27, 1967.

the crowd said, “Tell my brother how we are no longer slaves to the law but free from sin, tell my brother that there’s room at the table for him and for whoever else wants a seat. Tell him how you are here to heal the sick, bind up the wounds of the broken, provide rest for the worn out and the overwhelmed. Tell him and all the children who are victims of trafficking in this city that they have value and worth and are not commodities; that no person is a possession to be stored in a rotting barn. Tell my sisters and brothers who thought the church was a place of exclusion and hate that they are welcomed in your arms and in the arms of communities like Morningside. Tell the young men growing up in poverty in this city that there are more options than they might realize. Tell the 2 million men and women locked in prison barns that healing is possible and they have a place in your family.” Maybe Jesus would have said, “OK, and why don’t you go tell them too.”

What if we, the rich landowners with an abundance of possessions said “Lord, I’ve got more than I need right now, where could you use my extra and where could you use me?” What if we said that as a church, “Lord, we’ve got more than we need, where can you use us?” Maybe then we’d see, success isn’t abundance of resources, success is being rich in God, that unmerited grace God is just pouring on us, an inheritance for all, a field of grain with more than enough for all. Maybe then we could take a deep, breath, relax, and pull up a chair to this table.