

Year-C, Pentecost 8, Proper 13

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Luke 12:13-21 and Colossians 3:1-11

Storing Up Treasures Rich toward God

Luke always starts his stories by giving us a frame within which to view them. We are not talking about propositions hidden in code, flouting in space. No, these stories are human, coming from real people and deal with common human problems. They pull us in because we recognize them in ourselves.

“Someone from the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’” There it is again, brothers fighting—the human problem. I am reminded of Martha and Mary. “It’s not right! Jesus, do something. You are a Teacher. You see it, enforce fairness!”

“But Jesus said to him, Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you.” Jesus does not want to be looking down on this person he calls friend for that would change the nature of their relationship. He wants to be his friend. Jesus’ response isn’t hostile. “Friend” is a warm de-escalating word conveying a desire to connect with this man rather than judge him and he certainly does not want to arbitrate between this man and his brother.

Jesus says, if you want your conflict with your brother settled in your favor look at yourself and “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” You don’t suppose this man has made having more than his brother or resentfully having less, more important than his brother? Jesus’ uses the phrase “all kinds of greed in his warning to the man. “How many different kinds of greed are there? God had already given him life and Being as his beloved child yet he didn’t think that was enough. He wanted more possessions than his brother or maybe as many. In any case his focus was on possessions rather than relationships. And yet his worth was a gift already given. Is the “more” that he thought he must have a form of greed?

Ever since the serpent told Eve we shouldn’t trust God for our being and we believed it, we have instinctively feared we were being cheated. “His share is bigger than mine! It’s not fair.” We think we are getting less and we think we must have more. It’s so hard to see that what we already have is a huge blessing full of life and relatedness. There was a man in rivalry with his brother over who inherits their father’s possessions. They didn’t see that their greatest possession was their father’s love for them both.

Jesus tells them, “One’s life doesn’t consist in the abundance of possessions.” Does life consists in the abundance of quality relationships and an awareness of the Father’s blessing—his

blessing being the most intimate and nurturing relationship of all! Do we understand how blessed we are?

How wide do we draw the circle and who do we see as outside it? The width of our circle goes a long way in determining the quality of our life. Our possessions often distort relationships and get in the way. Jesus' circle includes all. His heart bleeds for all brother and sisters the world over who find themselves engulfed in disputes, wars, rivalries and jealousies, flames often fanned by their narcissistic leaders.

For the man who called out to Jesus, the world had shrunk to the point where all he was was his brother. Even Jesus could only be seen as a player in this dispute. How will Jesus get this man locked in battle to change his focus? Maybe he will tell him a story, a parable, designed to entice him into thinking in new ways.

A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop. Notice, it's the land that does the producing, not the rich man. He has so much he can't store it in his granary. Through no special merit of his own, he has more than he needs. What should he do? He could fill up his usual granaries and then share with those whose crops have not been so bountiful but he doesn't think of that.

He says to himself, "You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself." He is talking to himself! He has no dialogue partner.

He decides to build bigger barns. Do you think his solution is wise in a world filled with rivalry and real need? Do you think rivalry drives his thinking? If he had shared the extra with those who are in need would that increase his security or diminish it? I wonder what's driving him. Why does he insist on building bigger barns when there are other solutions? Do you think he is in rivalry and his rivalry is leading to greed?

The man in Jesus' story honors no one. He's not trying to be a blessing. He doesn't need God or anyone else. He thinks he has achieved total security.

In Jesus' story God is the heavy and God says, "Fool, tonight you will die." Don't make this into a theological statement about God. Remember it is a story meant to break into the man's focus on his brother.

And there is another surprise. A twisted smile breaks out when I get the irony of it. The man intent on building bigger barns upon his death gives all his stuff to others. In terms of his rivalry this is a fate worse than death.

To the man in the crowd Jesus now says, "This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God." The story ends with our mouths sagging.

What does Jesus mean; be rich toward God? The lectionary compilers knew what they were doing when they tied the Colossians passage with this Gospel story. Paul begins: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” It is a way of thinking about ourselves; we are hidden with Christ now, no more need for a bigger barn. We have died to all this rivalry stuff. Now that doesn’t mean we won’t ever be seen again. No, Paul says, “When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

Paul doesn’t mince words. “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly; fornication, impurity, passions, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of this the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.” When I read “wrath of God” I interpret that as a first century way of saying “the natural consequences” of how you have been living. I don’t read it as a statement about God’s character.

Paul goes on: “These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” Just as these are not a part of God so you must get rid of them too. Why, because it is not who you are now. That old you has died and now you draw your life from another place. So, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

For us who are dead in Christ, everything has changed, even our attitude toward who is in and who is out; who is “us” and who is “them”. As Paul says, “In that renewal; there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” If we live this, if we live all of this, as best we can, depending on God’s grace for the rest, we will be storing up treasures rich toward God. Amen