

“Fully Stocked on Empty”

Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

It’s the illusion of all illusions. Stuff. Money. Wealth. Possessions. It takes up space in our lives, in our houses, in our minds, our wallets, our dreams and our worries. And with all that space taken up things get crowded. And when things are crowded sometimes we can miss that our heart – or our soul – is empty. Or at least hungry. Or hungering. But – we might not even know it because all of our stuff is so good at making us feel full or safe or satisfied. It can be comforting. But it’s an illusion.

The late comedian George Carlin had a great bit on our obsessive accumulation of material things, and the modern anxiety for which it is both the cause and the result:¹

“You got your stuff with you? I’ll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses. Then there’s all the stuff you have in

your car. You got stuff in the trunk. Lotta different stuff: spare tire, jack, tools, old blanket, extra pair of sneakers. Just in case you wind up barefoot on the highway some night...

Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff. That’s what life is all about, tryin’ to find a place for your stuff! That’s all your house is; a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody’s got his own little pile of stuff. [with his own little cover on it and fence around it...]

¹ Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, “The Living Word: August 4, Ordinary 18C (Luke 12:13-21),” *The Christian Century* (9 July 2019), accessed on August 4, 2019 at

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/august-4-ordinary-18c-luke-1213-21>.

So now you got a houseful of stuff. And, even though you might like your house, you gotta move. Gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff! And that means you gotta move all your stuff. Or maybe, put some of your stuff in storage. Storage! Imagine that. There's a whole industry based on keepin' an eye on other people's stuff...[and it's locked up and just sitting there...waitin' for a rainy day! Our stuff has shelter and A/C when there are people in this world who don't have such luxuries!]

He goes on to talk about all the stuff we take with us when we travel (guilty, as charged!) ...and then concludes:

Well, by the time you get home you're pretty fed up with your stuff and all the problems it creates. and so about a week later, you clean out the closet, the attic, the basement, the garage, the storage locker, and all the other places you keep your stuff, and you get things down to manageable proportions. Just the right amount of stuff to lead a simple

and uncomplicated life. And that's when the phone rings. It's a lawyer. It seems your aunt has died....and left you all her stuff. Oh no! Now whaddya do? Right. You do the only thing you can do. The honorable thing. You tell the lawyer to stuff it.”²

We laugh at this, but there's so much truth in Carlin's bit. We are obsessed with stuff – the brands of stuff we have, the quality of stuff we have, the ways we protect it and store it and even the anxiety and time we spend to eventually get rid of it (downsizing anyone?). For many of us, it may not be the monetary value of our stuff that we struggle with – but the sentimental value. Which is another kind of idol...just like greed keeps us future-focused wanting more, sentimentality keeps us past-focused not wanting to let go of what we have. God calls us to the present. Because that's where the needs and the people are. The present.

Like Carlin's monologue, the parable Jesus tells us today portrays a situation of tragic

² Kittredge, *ibid.*

absurdity. We can see the absurd abundance clearly because it's not us. But just as we're patting ourselves on the back saying "*thank God we are not like him,*" when I think about it – I *am* like him. I like my stuff. It feels like mine. It feels normal, the stuff I have...not any more than most folks I know have. It doesn't feel like greed or wealth or materialism. But it is. I can't look at my closet full of clothes or my multi-room house full of multiple couches and beds and think otherwise. I have more than I need. And I like the stuff I have.

And here's the real kicker: it doesn't feel "un-Christian" to have the stuff I have. But really, it doesn't feel "un-Christian" because I've normalized a lot of the values in our American culture to be "Christian" values. But they're not. When I read the gospels and listen to Jesus, to Christ, I have to admit...my stuff may not be "un-Christian" but it is definitely un-Christ-like. My life doesn't look anything like Jesus' life. Jesus is not

materialistic. Not in the least. I am. I don't want to be, but I am. Buying new things is fun. Trying out the latest greatest gadget is fun. Looking cute is fun. But to what end?

Warning: this parable will probably make you uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable.

So, that said, here goes nothin'.

A man approaches Jesus and asks him to arbitrate a dispute he's having with his brother: "*Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.*" This is a reasonable request, right? After all, the guy isn't asking to inherit *more* than his brother; he just wants Jesus to advocate for basic fairness.³

But here's how Jesus responds: "*Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*" Hold up Jesus...since when is desiring fairness the same thing as being greedy?⁴

³ Debie Thomas, "Rich Toward God," *Journey with Jesus* (28 July 2019), accessed on August 4, 2019 at

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2291-rich-toward-god>.

⁴ Thomas, *ibid.*

If that's not confusing enough, Jesus keeps going, telling his listeners a parable about a rich landowner who carefully stores his wealth ahead of his retirement — only to learn that his life is about to end: *“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”* Okay, so what's wrong with planning ahead? With saving for a rainy day? With making prudent choices when it comes to wealth management?⁵ So we're all gonna die. But then we can give all our stuff to our kids or family or friends and pass on the wealth and the accumulation of stuff. Is that the value we want to be passing on? Versus giving what we have away? Just a question.

But wait, there's more: Jesus concludes with one more warning: *“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”* What does *that* mean? What does it mean to be *“rich toward God?”*

Professor Debie Thomas remarks, *“These are all hard and uncomfortable questions, and maybe the best we can do is wrestle with them. But for me, the biggest takeaway from this week's Gospel lesson is this: I need to stop assuming that my nearest and dearest concerns are also Jesus's.”*⁶

Suckerpunch #1.

“Like the man who seeks arbitration in the matter of his inheritance, I am a stickler for [equality] and fairness. Jesus isn't. [He doesn't ask us to be fair, he asks us to be generous.]

Like the rich man in the parable, I tend to think that I'm entitled to do what I want with my own hard-earned money. Jesus doesn't agree. [Jesus knows all we have is God's, not ours.]

Like both [of these] men, I tend to compartmentalize my life into convenient “secular” and “sacred” realms, such that loving my brother (or sister, or neighbor) as myself has little bearing on my totally reasonable legal pursuits, and

⁵ Thomas, *ibid.*

⁶ Thomas, *ibid.*

*contemplating my mortality
doesn't require me to
compromise my 401K. Again,
Jesus sees things differently.*

*Where I see in part, Jesus sees
the whole. Where I see what's
pressing along the surfaces of
my life, Jesus sees the depths of
my heart. Where I obsess over
the [personal and] temporal,
Jesus fights hard for the
[collective and the] eternal.⁷*

Jesus looks at the rich
landowner reveling in his stores
of grain, and sees a person
drowning in self-absorption. A
man enamored of his own
power. A man oblivious to his
own mortality. Notice the
narcissism of his inner
dialogue: *"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. And I will say
to my soul, 'Soul, you have
ample goods laid up for many
years; relax, eat, drink, and be
merry.'"*⁸

Me, myself, and I.

In the carefully curated
narrative of a proud, self-made

man, Jesus sees an isolated,
insecure soul who has forgotten
human connection, forgotten
God's generosity and provision,
forgotten that possession is not
stewardship, and forgotten that
in the face of Death (the great
equalizer) we are all naked
paupers but for the grace of
God.⁹

So...at this point, the
temptation (for me) is to retreat
into abstraction. Into metaphor.
To say, "Well, this Gospel
lesson is not *literally* about
money. It's about my attitude
towards money. It's about my
heart. Money itself is neither
here nor there; money itself is
morally neutral."¹⁰

Well, yes. But also no. The
squirmy fact is that Jesus talks
about money and possessions
more than just about any other
topic. There are like 500 verses
about prayer in the Bible and
200 hundred verses on faith. Do
you know how many verses
there are in Bible about
finances or wealth? 2,000+.
That should be a sign unto us,
right? Like one of those
obnoxious billboards out by
DIA these days. Why are there

⁷ Thomas, *ibid.*

⁸ Thomas, *ibid.*

⁹ Thomas, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Thomas, *ibid.*

2,000+ verses on finances and wealth? Because there's something about money that distorts us. Something that makes us defensive. Something that makes it very hard for us to hear the Gospel in its risky and radical fullness. Something in its allure that grabs hold of us, and doesn't easily let go.¹¹

And it is a huge issues our culture today – but it clearly was back then too! Which speaks to the universal pull that money and stuff and the clinging to what is “mine” has on our minds and our hearts. And the detrimental effect it can have on our faith. And it's not just having a lot of money that detrimental. Obsessing about not having enough money or worry where the next bill is going to come from is detrimental. Or obsessively worrying about borrowing money or paying it back or being in debt or saving too much or too little...these anxieties are detrimental too. Because they pull our focus to ourself and pull our focus away from God. They put our faith in our finances and not in God.

Which is why Jesus concludes his lesson with an exhortation to be “*rich toward God.*” It's a beautiful and inspiring phrase, but what does it mean? What does a heart (and a lifestyle, and a home, and a bank account) “rich toward God” look like? “Maybe — if we can infer from the reading today — it means guarding against greed instead of obsessing over fairness. Maybe it means holding our mortality closer than we want to. Maybe it means asking hard questions about what makes us feel secure or insecure. Maybe it means acknowledging that even our hard-earned, well-earned, self-earned wealth comes from God and belongs to God. [And – any skills or talents or gifts that we used to make our hard earned money come from God too!] Maybe it means prioritizing human interconnectedness over personal gain or asset management. Maybe it means dialoguing with God more ardently than we monologue with ourselves¹² [or more than we check our stock market app

¹¹ Thomas, *ibid.*

¹² Thomas, *ibid.*

or calling our financial advisor].

In the parable Jesus tells, God confronts the rich landowner with chilling words: “*This very night your life is being demanded of you.*” Are we listening? What would change about our financial lives if we really believed this? What would we do differently if we believed that God does in fact demand our lives from us every single day, in every single way? Because he does, doesn't he? The call to take up our cross is a daily, hourly, minute by minute call. Is it also a dollar by dollar call?¹³

If our lives *have* in fact been demanded of us, then how should we live? What should we leave behind? What should we carry forward? What should we give away?¹⁴

The text says, “*Be rich toward God.*” Don't shy away. Be brave and wrestle with what this invitation means, because the richness we spend on God is the only richness we'll keep in the end.¹⁵

And here is why it matters:

God wants us to live full, abundant lives – not scarce or empty lives. But money and stuff is such a powerful illusion of fullness that God calls us to loosen our grip on it. And to really ask ourselves: do we believe that money provides for our needs? Or that God provides for our needs? Money is a tool; not the totality.

Our reality is that no matter how much we have, we are always aware of things we don't have. Our culture is set up to remind us of this constantly, which leads us to feel empty and to want more “stuff.”

There's a horrible paradox in greed — it's never satisfied by what it desires. This is true for people who have a lot of money. It's also true for folks who don't have a lot of money. The amount of money is not the issue. The issue is what priority and place and preoccupation money and things have in our lives.

¹³ Thomas, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Thomas, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Thomas, *ibid.*

I love the way Eugene Peterson writes verses 20 and 21 in *The Message*: “Just then God showed up and said, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?’ “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”

How are you feeling these days about life? Are you rich toward stuff or rich towards God? Is your barn filled with Self? Or with God?

I invite you to take a deep breath right now. Imagine a big red barn full of all of your favorite things – your favorite clothes or outfits, your favorite gadgets or cars, your favorite memorabilia or electronics... those things that make you happy...those things at your favorite store that you’re waiting to go on sale right now...those items that are sitting in your Amazon cart...those things that you already own that you like to show off to family and friends...those things that make your house “your home.” Imagine that barn full to the brim. And where there is extra space, imagine your savings accounts and retirement

accounts filling in the extra spaces.

Now imagine a barn full of the people– your family members and friends. Your pets. Your kids and grandkids. And because it’s a big barn imagine there being enough room for more people...people who are on the border trying to survive, people who are on ventilators and in ICU beds trying to survive gunshot wounds, people who you’ve seen walking around your neighborhood or even people whose stories you’ve seen on the news...they are all in this barn too. People who are down and out. People who are well off. People who are well-known to you. People who’ve you’ve never met.

Look at the two barns. Which is more valuable? Which can you lose? Which would you do anything to save? I think the answer is probably pretty easy for most of us, right? The people...we’d save the people.

And there’s the rub. We say we’d save the people...but more often than not, we save our stuff. I know I do. I turn a blind eye to the suffering of

others for the sake of holding on to my stuff or for the sake of acquiring the stuff I want.

We all want to do the right thing in our hearts, but the pull toward self and wealth is strong. Every possession is strong. Every decision we contemplate, every purchase we make, every policy we advocate for, every leader we vote for, every dollar we spend, every person we speak to, every word we speak – they all support one of these barns...the barn of stuff or the barn of people. The barn of self or the barn of God. The barn of greed or the barn of love.

This is a hard reality. It's a hard sermon, I get it. I feel it too. There are no simple answers. The question is: *Is your barn filled with Self? Or with God?*

God has created us in such a way that we don't need to store up anything on this earth. That is a myth we came up with sometime after the Garden of Eden. Remember the garden? Adam and Eve – just hanging out together in all that beauty...without even clothes and without any shame or greed or wealth? And then something happened – they had the

opportunity to eat something that God told them not to eat. They listened to their hunger. They wanted something they couldn't have (and didn't need). And the minute they took a bite – they felt shame, and embarrassment, and then started working – not just to till the garden and provide for God's creation – but to provide for themselves and to protect themselves.

At our creation we didn't need a lot of goods and material things stored up to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. Something tells me we still don't. But we think we do.

How do we knock down our barns and get back to the garden?

How do we make sure we aren't fully stocked on empty, but rather on the eternal?

I don't know the answer...but I do know we each need to be wrestling with the question.

Amen.