

Building Bigger Barns
Harvest 2016
Reflections on Luke 12:16-21

Jesus tells people a story. And if you remember my short meditation in the last issue of the church newsletter, you may also remember that towards the end I re-wrote the story a bit... Never mind, if you don't.

The re-written version of the text is not my main point today, but you may want to take a copy of the newsletter and read it after this sermon...

Jesus tells a parable. It has several possible interpretations.

Jesus says that there was a farmer who had a great year in the fields. It was an exceptionally successful crop. When the farmer sees this great crop, he decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so that he can store it all.

Now here is a confusing part of the parable. Why did he need to tear down the old barns before building the new, bigger barns? Couldn't the farmer in the parable have built a smaller additional barn rather than tearing down the others? Perhaps one of the points that we are to get from this parable is that this man is showing off his wealth a bit. He is spending his money extravagantly...on big barns. I wouldn't be surprised if Jesus is trying to point out that what the farmer had before was adequate and that this large expenditure was not necessary. There are people starving and living on the street, and this guy goes and tears down his old barns and builds bigger barns when maybe just an extension would have worked.

However, while this interpretation might be consistent with the previous teachings of Jesus, I don't think that this is the only point he wants to make.

The farmer's sin in the parable is not having a great harvest. There is nothing wrong with having a great harvest, and it can and should be seen as a blessing from God. And I would say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with building bigger barns and storing the grain.

As we read through the book of Genesis we find that Joseph, the son of Jacob, was sold into slavery in Egypt. But through a series of divine interventions Joseph becomes second in command, second only to the Pharaoh of Egypt.

While Joseph is second in command he begins a program of collecting and saving grain to prepare for the upcoming drought that had been revealed to him through a dream of Pharaoh's. There were seven years with a great crop and then seven years of famine. So Joseph saved the grain of Egypt, and had to build bigger barns to store it in.

At the conclusion of the story we find Joseph being reunited with his brothers, the same men who had sold him into slavery. Joseph has been able to provide enough grain to keep not only the people of Egypt fed, but even people from distant lands, like his brothers from Canaan. And Joseph delivers one of my favourite lines in the Bible when he says, "What you have intended for evil, God used for good."

You see, storing up goods is not a bad thing. The criticism of the rich farmer is that he was hoarding it for himself. Read through our scripture for this morning and count with me how many times the farmer refers to *his* stuff or *my* stuff. Mine, mine, mine, me, me, me...

The point of the parable isn't that it is wrong to store up things. I would actually say that there are times when it is good to save for your future. It would be poor stewardship not to. But all this farmer is worried about is saving up as much as he can for himself so that he can take it easy. Joseph was storing things up to help an entire nation, a nation where he lived as an ex-pat if you like.

I think that Jesus' main purpose for telling this parable is because of greed and selfishness. The man there has shut out everyone else from his life and his thoughts. There is no one else in the story – just the man and his possessions – until God speaks to him. ... declares what the future actually holds for him. The reversal couldn't be sharper. God addresses the man as "fool". "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The man wanted to be "merry", and now he is called a "fool"...

And till the end of the parable we do not really know why he is a fool. There may be many reasons for it: Maybe because he is so greedy... Maybe because he is selfish and alone, maybe because he is without family and community... Maybe...

God says that the man's life will be demanded of him... Okay. But allow me one question: did this man really live? What sort of life is that? How empty must a life be when it is only full of things, but not full of friends?

This man has everything he has desired over many years, but what he lacks is the security that comes through love. The love of family and friends. The love of God.

Is what happens to the farmer in the parable, what will happen to people who think they don't need anyone, who think they can totally manage on their own?

And what about the man's greed? Greed is the opposite of generosity.

The thought of what he might be able to do for those in need never enters the rich fool's mind. His innermost thoughts reveal that he has no sense of responsibility to use his abundance for the welfare of people less fortunate than him. Has his greed eaten away any compassion he may once have had?

The greatest good this man can imagine is a life of maximizing his own pleasure. Leisure, recreation, freedom from the demands of work, nothing else... And what then will give his life meaning?

Or what was the meaning of his life anyway?

The rich fool may claim that he has always believed in God, but when it comes to managing his life, dealing with possessions and planning the future, he lives as though there was no God.

The parable tests our basic commitments.

What difference should our faith in God make in the practical matters of our lives? How should we live so that God will not call us a "fool"?

In a commentary I read, the reflections on this parable begin with the sentence "Better a poor farmer than a rich fool." And I guess this is what most of us would agree to, isn't it.

If we had to choose between a rich existence in loneliness and a poorer life full of love, friends and feasts, what would we choose?

I leave the answer to that question to each of you...

But I want to suggest that the mere fact that you are here in this church today, puts you miles away from the rich fool... Amen.