First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

July 31, 2022

Fool’s Gold

Luke 12:13-21

**13**Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” **14**But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” **15**And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” **16**Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. **17**And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ **18**Then he said, ‘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. **19**And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ **20**But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ **21**So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

I’ve mentioned the fact, in past sermons, that I’m a Lectionary preacher. And, as I’ve explained before, the Lectionary is a three-year cycle of readings from the Bible that is used by many different denominations, as a way of demonstrating the unity of Christ’s church. On any given Sunday, if you attend a church where the preacher uses the Lectionary, you’ll hear the same scripture passages read, and expounded on, regardless of whether a particular congregation is Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Methodist, or Episcopalian, or Catholic.

The Lectionary is a wonderful resource for those of us who preach, however it can be also be a double-edged sword, in so much as it often takes me to places, I’d rather not go.

Now, there are times when I look at the text, for a specific week, and the light bulb comes on in such a way that the sermon practically writes itself. There are other times, however, when I have to dig deep in order to find something meaningful to say, either because the passage is so familiar, that it seems everything that could possibly be said has already been said, or because the passage presents challenges in terms of our specific context. How do I interpret a difficult passage for you, in such a way that makes you think, without pushing so many buttons that y’all simply shut down and stop listening?

This is what I faced with today’s passage. So, let’s see if where this one lands.

As is the case with many of the Lectionary passages, today’s reading starts in the middle of the story. So, we need to back up a bit in order to understand what was going on here. In the first twelve verses of this chapter, Jesus is talking to his disciples about hypocrisy. There’s also a large crowd, numbering in the thousands, listening in. Some of the commentaries note that this is Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount. So, what Jesus is saying is kind of important.

Out of the blue, someone in the crowd interrupts Jesus and asks for something that’s completely out of left field and has absolutely no connection to what Jesus is talking about. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Now, in and of itself, this isn’t an unusual request. Rabbi’s often were called upon to mediate family disputes, especially as they related to property and money. It’s the way this guy goes about it that raises some eyebrows. This anonymous, unnamed person in the crowd, is so distracted by what’s going on in his life, that he just blurts out his question (his demand really), without any regard to what’s happening around him.

Jesus basically shuts the guy down by responding why are you asking me? “Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” Now, Jesus could have left it there and gone back to what he was saying to the crowd, but he sees the interruption as a teaching moment and relates to the crowd the parable of the rich fool.

In what is possibly the shortest parable in the New Testament, Jesus tells the story of a very rich man with lots of land and with barns stuffed full of grain. He’s had a great harvest and has run out of room to store the abundance that God has given him. So, he finds a contractor and says, “Hey!” “I need bigger barns, and I need them right now!” The contractor must have been really good, because he was able to do the job on time and on budget. Oh, for a contractor who does things on time and on budget!

So, the rich fool has new and bigger barns, all stuffed to the rafters with his abundance, and he’s sitting back thinking he’s on easy street. He tells himself I’ve got plenty, I’m going to relax, drink and be merry! But God has other ideas and in verses 20 and 21, we hear God saying, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

This is where it can get a bit tricky for those of us who are called to preach on this passage. One way to interpret this passage can be that Jesus is denouncing wealth, and there are plenty of preachers who won’t go any deeper than this somewhat superficial reading of Luke’s Gospel. But, before I go on, let me be clear; Jesus isn’t condemning having wealth or accumulating more wealth. Nor is Jesus saying you can’t enjoy ourselves. We know that the Bible offers plenty of examples of God’s people eating, drinking and being merry, and we can all say thanks be to God, for that.

So, if God isn’t condemning wealth, in this passage, what exactly is God trying to say here? If we take a look at the conversation that the rich fool is having with himself, we can begin to see what the true message Jesus is trying to convey. You’ll notice that first of all, the rich fool isn’t talking to anyone else, and there’s no one else mentioned in the story. Second, notice the *way* he’s talking to himself. The rich fool is using “I” exclusively here. And that’s the issue that Jesus is addressing here.

The rich fool has become so wrapped up in his wealth; so distracted by his material possessions, that he’s not only *not* taking time to thank God for what he has been so abundantly blessed with, he also gives absolutely no though, or concern, for those around him who might be in need.

A few weeks back, I preached about Martha and Mary and how Jesus gently told Martha not to allow herself to be distracted by unimportant things. In that sermon, I talked about how all of Martha’s “busyness” and concerns about hosting Jesus and his disciples, didn’t matter to Jesus. He was not at all concerned about the niceties of social convention or what was “proper.”

Jesus’ ministry wasn’t about upholding or reinforcing the religious and societal customs, or practices, of the day, instead Jesus offered a new way of thinking; a new way of being, in a word, he offers us freedom.

The rich fool was in bondage to the *idea* of wealth, which Jesus considers completely unimportant. Yes, planning and working for financial security is a very good thing, and we all want to have enough money to live a comfortable life, but being obsessed by possessions, to the exclusion of all else, and without any thought to those less fortunate, isn’t healthy or biblical.

Even though this guy has more than he will ever need, in order to live a comfortable life, he’s unwilling to use even a fraction of his wealth to help out those who may be struggling. Again, having and acquiring wealth, isn’t the issue here. It’s what happens after wealth is accumulated that matters.

How would this story differ if this very wealthy man had not been so distracted by his possessions? What if, instead of hoarding the bounty that God had so generously given him, he had shared it with his neighbors?

Up to this point, I’ve been equating wealth with material possessions. But there are other types of wealth, of course. There’s the wealth of talents, the wealth of experience, the wealth of knowledge and so many others. Scripture tells us that there are many gifts, but it is the same giver who give them.

Obviously, the man in this parable knew a bit about farming. What if he had shared his knowledge about raising crops with those around him? What type of impact might that have had on his neighbors?

And what about us? We all have talents, we all have gifts, we all have wealth, even if it’s not a fat bank account or any other thing that meets our modern society’s definition of wealth.

What happens when we get so distracted by our desire to maximize the gifts that God has given us that we forget to share those God given gifts with those around us? What good is being the best musician, or the best teacher, or the best farmer, in the world, if we don’t first acknowledge God’s generosity and second share those gifts in order to make the world a better place for everyone? If we practice the piano four hours each and every day, but fail to share the joy, and the gift, of music with others; if we paint or create art, but refuse to let anyone see it, what exactly is the point of having those gifts in the first place?

Yes, the traditional interpretation of this text, which has Jesus calling out the rich fool for failing to share his physical wealth with his neighbors, is completely valid. At the same time, I believe it’s important to remember that wealth isn’t just about money or possessions.

In verse 20, God tells the rich fool that his life will be demanded of him that very night. The Greek translation of the word “life,” means “soul” and that puts an entirely different spin on the reading, doesn’t it? What I believe this passage is warning us about, is that we cannot risk being so ungrateful or distracted by whatever wealth God has given us, that we fail to make the world around us better for those not as fortunate as ourselves. Not to show the same generosity to others, that God has shown to us, puts our very soul at risk.

How much better would our world be if we used all of our wealth, material and otherwise, to lift up those around us? How much brighter would the lives of our neighbors, friends and family be, if that were the norm instead of the materialistic, greed-based culture that we live in?

I believe that’s exactly what God is calling us to do. And if we follow God’s call to lift up those around us; to brighten the lives of those in need, whether it’s a physical or spiritual need, then perhaps we have come closer to creating Heaven right here on Earth. **AMEN**