

*A Barn Full*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Texts:**  
Luke 12:13-21

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### Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "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."



When I stepped off the plane in Port au Prince, Haiti in February of 1995 I really wasn't sure what to expect. I had talked about it with members of the church I was serving at the time, people who had been there before and we had discussed it when our delegation met during the weeks leading up to the trip so I had some idea about what was to come, but conversation about something and the reality of it aren't always the same. I knew it would be warm, for example, but I was really not prepared for 86 degrees and sunshine having just left snow-covered Philadelphia in 6 degree weather. So I guess not any amount of talking about it could have prepared me for that day.

We made our way through the airport terminal, negotiating with someone to carry our bags for the amount of money that our friends who lived there had told us should be the upper limit. We made it through customs without incident and we headed for the door. It was very crowded, the language was different, the sounds and smells and sights were overloading my senses but I was doing okay. I stayed close to the others traveling with me and we looked for those who were supposed to meet us. When we found them they had us follow them out of the terminal, through the gate, and through the congested

traffic in the street out front. We were moving quickly as a single mass once outside the airport fence and I was feeling secure since we were all crammed together. People started gathering around us – young men wanted to carry our bags, others wanted to sell us things, everyone wanted to do whatever they thought would earn them some of our money.

As we made our way across the street toward the parking lot – not really a parking lot but a field that became a parking lot once the US military helped President Aristide return – I began to feel not-so-secure. I had a book-bag on my back and I was carrying my Phillies cap. Little boys started approaching us individually as we peeled off from our blob of human security. They asked for whatever we had, cigarettes, cameras, food, money, anything that we might have brought with us. Several boys started bugging me about my Phillies cap. "Give me my hat," they were saying, "Give me my hat, sir. You can get another. Give me my hat. That's my hat. I don't have one. You can buy another. You have money. You can buy another."

The boys swarmed around us as we made our way to the cars. Our hosts enlisted several to help us get the baggage loaded on top and in the back and they thinned out who was going to get paid. One boy, though, was being persistent about my ball cap. He began tugging at the brim.

"Give me my hat, sir," he kept insisting.

"No," I said over and over again trying to be polite.

"You're rich," he said to me, "You can buy another one."

I kept shaking my head "no" even as we got into the car and as he tried to hold onto the brim as I sat down in the seat, even reaching in the open window as the door closed.

"Sir, please give me my hat," I heard as we pulled away.

I still hear it today in fact, "Sir, give me my hat, sir."

"I felt pressured, out of control, scared might describe it," I wrote

in my journal that night. It was the only time I was scared that entire week. But I also felt something else in the middle of this scene. I felt what I want to call guilt, although that's probably not the most accurate description of the feeling. As that young boy pulled at my hat he looked me in the eye and said with all the sincerity he could muster, "You're rich. You can buy another one." I remember thinking to myself, "You know he's right. This is a \$3.99 hat that you bought at the mall. You *can* buy another one. He has nothing. Why are you hanging on to it? Give it to him." But I didn't let go. I kept saying "no" and I drove away holding onto my hat as tightly as I could as if my life depended on it.

Later that week, I met another young boy, a 13 year old named James living in Cite Soliel, a slum in Port au Prince that Mother Teresa considers one of the worst in the world. I was awed by his ability to survive in the muck around him let alone his ability to speak not only Creole but also French, English and Spanish. We walked along for a few minutes, he carrying a five gallon bucket of water on his head, me wearing my Phillies cap and carrying my little pocket camera. We talked in English and a little bit of Spanish. As we got close to the gate where our group was headed, I asked him if I could take his picture. He said "yes", but then just couldn't give up the opportunity to ask me for my camera.

"No," I said, "I can't."

"You can buy another one," he said, "You're rich."

There it was again. "He's right, you know," I thought to myself, "You could buy another one. He can't. Why not just give it to him."

I shook my head "no", said "I'm sorry," and walked quickly through the gate to catch up with the others.

It came to a head, this guilt feeling or whatever it was, when I boarded the plane to return from Miami to Philadelphia after the first leg of the trip from Port au Prince to the US. As I got on board, I immediately noticed the kinds of clothes people had on, the

overwhelming perfumes they wore, the jewelry around their necks and on their hands. I had to walk through first class to get to my seat. An obviously American, rich, older couple was holding up the line. They had the first row in the plane and were arguing with the flight attendant about something, hot towels, or chocolate mousse, or champagne or something. I began to get angry. As I sat in my seat waiting for take-off, a lawyer behind me picked up the air-phone from the headrest cradle in front of her, inserted her credit card, and talked long distance from the plane for the next 50 minutes or so costing probably more than six months of my phone bills. "Don't these people know about Haiti," I thought, "It's disgusting how rich we are when others are so poor." Guilt mixed with anger festered as we took off for Philadelphia.

Others had warned me. The reentry from a trip like this is the most difficult adjustment you'll have to make. This being my first trip outside the U.S., the contrast in wealth and poverty is what did me in. My spirit was uplifted by the trip as a whole, but culture shock took over when I headed for home. When I shared my guilt and anger and frustration with friends they told me, "Be careful with those kinds of feelings." On the surface I knew that I had to be careful. I know that I can't just give away all that I have to readjust the poverty level that I found in Haiti. I know that I can't solve the world's wealth distribution problems all by myself and certainly not with anger and guilt as my guiding inspiration. But deep down within my soul was a voice that said, "Soul, there are things about this world that you have never known." A chord was struck deep within that made me understand the world differently, made me understand myself and my own wealth a little differently, made me understand the contrast between rich and poor a little differently, made me understand the Gospel a little differently.

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions," Jesus told a crowd that had gathered one day to hear him. Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 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 goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many

years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Is this parable a condemnation of rich people? Is Jesus telling us that anyone who has an abundance of possessions is doomed because of those possessions? If so, we're all in deep trouble. If my Haiti trip taught me anything about wealth and poverty it taught me that there really is no way to compare the possessions that we in the United States have with what the majority of other people in this world have. My trip also taught me that if this parable is about condemnation of the rich, then you and I are doomed. You don't have to hear me say it, you know it as well as I do. We each have *at least* a barn full of things that have the potential to control our lives – TV's and DVD players, MP3 players, cars, cell phones, computers, houses, gadgets and doodads that do for us practically everything that we don't want to do for ourselves.

Those of us who live in the industrialized world eat too much, buy more than we need, waste enormous amounts, consume more than our share of natural resources, and spend too much on our own security and pleasure. We constantly face the temptation to base our happiness on material possessions. We are told over and over again that happiness and status come from having rather than being. It is a seductive world we live in. We have so much grain and so many goods that our barns are bursting at the seams and we are tempted to build newer, larger barns to hold the extra stuff.

So if this parable wants to tell us that possessions will be the cause of our death, then we're in trouble. But that's not what this parable is about. Jesus' teachings about being rich or poor comes from his conviction about the spiritual consequences of wealth. Throughout the Gospels the Jesus message proclaims that a great reversal would happen within God's kingdom – God's reign – a reversal which would "fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53). But he was also certain that "the poor will be with us always" (John 12:8). Yet Jesus also teaches that the reign of God is not just out there somewhere in the distant future, but it's also right here with us now in the present. So if that's true then it should

be our conviction as believers and followers that we can help to bring about that great reversal. This parable has something to do with that.

This parable is about bringing about balance *now*, not fearing condemnation at some future day of judgment. It's about balancing what you *have* now with who you *are* now and with who *others* are. It's about balance between being rich in this world and being rich toward God.

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly." The man's already rich the parable tells us. Nothing wrong with that it seems – that's a given. His land produced abundantly. Nothing wrong with that either – our congratulations to the rich man. He has barns, we learn. Nothing wrong with that, every rich person has barns. His barns are full. Which is okay, one would expect the barns of a rich person to be full. But there's no place to put the extra stuff. What should he do?

Here's the turning point in the parable, the reversal. How does a person who has everything respond when he or she suddenly has more than is needed?

It seems to me there are several options. First, he could have let the extra stuff rot on the ground. Second, he could have given it away to others who didn't have such a great year. Third, he could tear down his perfectly good barns, build other larger ones, and live off the excess for the next few years. You know which option he chose.

Can't there be a balance between building larger barns to hoard what you don't really need and giving up all that you have including what you really need to survive in order to feed those who have nothing? That's what I think I've been searching for ever since my enlightening trip to Haiti. There must be a way to use the abundance that I have in order to make life a little more livable for others that have nothing. It's more than giving up my Phillies cap or my pocket camera. It's more than feeling guilt for having too much or feeling anger at those who refuse to recognize that others are poor. There has to be a balance in the living of our lives that allows us to have full barns and yet be true to the Gospel. There has to be something that allows us to choose the second option, giving the abundance to others

who didn't have such a great year. That something is what it means to be rich toward God.

"If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy," wrote E.B. White, "If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. That makes it hard to plan the day!"

Balance. How do you balance between a world that seduces you with great wealth and a God that calls you to great compassion? How do you find balance between savoring and saving the world? In the parable it is not the amassing of wealth that causes the rich man the problem, but the distraction that the gathering of wealth causes. He has been seduced into building larger barns instead of considering his other options and he therefore has lost out on what remained of his life. The rich man has used up his entire life making money so that he can enjoy the life that he has entirely used up. There is something so true about that ending that it sort of jolts me awake. But I suppose that's the point of a parable isn't it?

It's much easier to live a life of abundance in possessions than it is to live in an abundance of richness toward God. But God has called us to something far greater than the gathering of things. We have been called to the gathering of our brothers and sisters. "We are **not** responsible for everyone at our front gate," says Thomas Conley, "But we **are** responsible for knowing who is **at** the front gate and not going out the back door to avoid knowing." It's much easier to build larger barns with back doors so we can store our extra possessions and leave by the back door to avoid those out front who need us. But that doesn't work, says the parable. It catches up to you sooner than you think. Just when you think you've made it, it's over. And who gets the things that you have stored in the barn? I guess it doesn't matter does it? Perhaps, suggests the parable, it would be better if you try to balance your life a little better, a little earlier.

It's not the abundance in our barns that causes the problem, it's our failure to understand what it means to be rich toward God that pulls us down. "A miserly, rich old man visited a rabbi. The rabbi took

him to a window and said, 'Look out there.' The man looked out to the street. 'What do you see?' asked the rabbi. 'I see men and women and little children.' Then the rabbi led the man to a mirror. 'What do you see now?' The rich man answered, 'Now I see myself.' Then the rabbi said, 'Behold – in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver, and no sooner is silver added than you cease to see others, but see only yourself.'" (Basil Miller)

You cannot find balance if the silver behind the glass won't let you see who's out there. When we can no longer see the people out the window we have lost our perspective, lost sight of our purpose, lost our focus on being rich toward God.

"I had been milking in the barn," writes Marilyn Borchardt who spent many years serving God by working with people in poverty in Mexico, "thinking about the irony of producing too much milk while people in the world were hungry, when I remembered an invitation in our church bulletin for people interested in representing our conference on a study tour in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The announcement said the purpose was to explore the root causes of world hunger. God seemed to be urging me to go and so I sent in my name, never dreaming that I would be selected. The reality of poverty and the faith of those Mexican Christians living in the midst of it, changed my life."

Marilyn could have bought an extra refrigerator for her barn and stored the excess milk there. But instead that milk and that barn of hers led her to an encounter with poverty in Mexico and an encounter with God. When she came home, she began to speak to groups of people and preach sermons to congregations about hunger and poverty and our responsibility to do something about it. She encouraged members of her church to hold hunger meals to raise money for hunger projects and to support her denomination's world hunger appeal. One member of her church was inspired and took on the job of serving as coordinator of the local interfaith food pantry. "Sometimes when I am in the barn, milking the cows and thus producing even more surplus milk, I have to think and laugh. When I went to Mexico two years ago, I agreed to work on hunger issues for

one year. I found I have a lifetime commitment."

"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, be merry.'" It seems to me that the rich man in the parable and Marilyn Borchardt have different souls. One soul says kick back and relax for the next few years, the other soul says go preach and teach and bring an end to world hunger.

"You fool!" God says. But to only one of them God says that. One of those people is rich toward God, the other has stored up treasures for himself. Both of them found that their barns were full. One of them found a lifetime commitment; the other found his life used up. One of them found balance; the other one has left larger barns as an inheritance.

When our barns are full we have to decide what to do next. Do we tear them down and build larger barns? Do we let the excess rot in the field? Do we take the excess and give it to others in need? What I want to suggest today is that our barns are already full and we are now at the turning point in the parable that is our life. What to do next. There is a great deal of pleasure in gathering possessions into larger barns, but there is a great deal more to life than what you can possess. There is much more satisfaction in finding richness toward God so go for that option which gives you that God-richness, not the silver and gold richness.

I'm not sure how to tell you how to do that. That's something you have to decide with God's guidance. It's about choosing how you want to live your life – or better yet, it's about choosing how God wants you to live your life. Sister Joan Chittister puts it this way:

It is not circumstances that make or destroy a life. It is the way we live each of the circumstances of life, the humdrum as well as the extraordinary, the daily as well as the defining moments, that determines the quality of our lives. Yet, each of us has the latitude to live life either well or poorly. Ironically enough, it is

a matter of decision. And the decision is ours. (Sr. Joan Chittister, *30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 2002*)

My personal experience has shown me that my barn is way too full already and that there are people in Haiti who don't need larger barns but do need the compassion to which God calls me. So the next time I am tempted to build larger barns, I suspect I will think twice. Not because of guilt or anger or frustration, but because I am looking for balance between what I have and what my life is. My personal experience has led me to change my life – to choose a quality of life that is not about possessions and bigger barns but is about people and relationships.

And I also now know that there are people all over the world that need us to respond with that which God has given us. The poor will be with us always, we can't deny that and we can't just ignore them. There are people in our very own neighborhoods that need us. There are people at our back doors and our front gates. And we worship a God that calls us to know who is at our front gate.

The next time you're considering what to do because your barn is full, forget about building a larger barn. Instead, say to your soul, "Soul, I'm feeling rich toward God today. I think I'll give this abundance away."

Amen.