

Practicing Your Faith: Live as a Steward

Luke 12:13-21

February 21, 2016

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We are now in the season of Lent – the 40 days that lead us to Easter, where we focus on how much we need to grace that God provides through Jesus Christ. This Lent our sermons will explore the ways that God calls us to practice our faith.

It's a common misconception that faith is primarily about knowledge. That our goal in the life of faith is to figure out the right things to believe. Faith is not primarily about knowledge. It is primarily about practice. It's when we practice our faith that it becomes real. It's when we live it that it brings transformation.

Last week Katherine preached a marvelous sermon on the importance of practicing our faith through the act of worship. Today I will be preaching on the importance of stewardship – or generosity. I will be reading a parable from Luke's gospel – our scripture comes just as Jesus is giving the crowds that follow him a pep talk on how to stay vigilant in the faith. And in this midst of this pep talk, a person interrupts Jesus to ask him to settle a family dispute about money.

Listen for the word of the Lord...

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Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But Jesus said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'

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.'

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 my 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 towards God.’

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You can pretty much bank on the fact that if Jesus answers your question with a parable, the point is that there are things you need to change in your perspective or your life.

“And just who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asked...and Jesus answered him with a parable about the Good Samaritan.

“How can you call yourself righteous if you welcome and eat with sinners?” the Pharisee’s grumbled...and Jesus answered them with a parable about the Prodigal Son.

“What can you do to help me get my fair share of the family business from my brother?” comes the question in today’s reading...and Jesus answers it with a parable about a man who tore down his existing barns to build bigger ones.

If Jesus answers your question with a parable, you better shape up. But some people are in good shape. In the past month I’ve crossed paths with at least three people who don’t need a parable-lecture because their lives seem to reflect the lesson that Jesus seeks to teach in this morning’s scripture.

One is a person who went on a mission trip to Haiti where the people and the country captured his heart. One trip led to two led to fifteen years...and non-profit start-up...and a number of sustained

friendships...and a discovery of what is a holy and transformational calling.

Another is a person who has provided exquisite care for an aging parent with a myriad of health issues...who has paid for nurses, and sitters, and medicines, and physical therapies...and sat by the bedside...and rushed to the nursing home...because that is what a child does when their parent is sick.

The third person is a brand new mom who is downright giddy as she prepares to buy her first package of diapers...which will lead to more packages of diapers...and then to clothes...and pediatrician co-pays...and Christmas presents...and Disney trips...and basketball goals...and laptops...and cars...and college tuition...and maybe even a few expenses after her child graduates from college.

Three different stories...three different stages...but the people that I am describing having something in common because they know what it is to love someone more than they love their money. They know it as joy. And as I understand the parable that Jesus taught, to love people more than our money is also Christian.

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Jesus told the story of a man who had a big problem, and he needed a solution. He had more stuff than he knew what to do with. So he took his barns...and he tore them down...and then he built bigger barns to help him manage his problem.

At first glance you might think that the point of Jesus' parable is primarily about money, or the abundance of possessions. But really, this is a parable about neighbors.

I missed that at first, because when I heard this parable the first things I focused on were the barns.

Immediately, I thought about the tear-down-build along my primary jogging route in my neighborhood that looks more like a castle than a house – and I started to feel a little self-righteous.

But then I thought about the storage unit I paid \$129.00 a month on for three years just to stash away the stuff that wouldn't fit into my barn and I started to feel a little self-conscious.

And then I noticed what words the man in the parable used when he was making a decision about what to do with his stuff. Did you catch what he said? Listen again:

“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 my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

I, I, I, my, my, my...who is missing in that equation?

Most people – when they have a family meeting about a big decision – gather that family or the people like family and have a conversation. Yet for the man in the parable, it was a family of one. And Jesus called it foolish.

The man thought he had a possession problem.
What he really had was a neighbor problem.

There are places in the Bible where rich people are maligned because they make their money at the expense of other people. The gospel of Matthew has a parable about a dishonest manager. The Prophets of the Old Testament decry the way the rich and powerful take advantage of the poor. But in this story, there is nothing to suggest the man made his money in inappropriate ways. He simply had a good crop. He made a wise investment. But he was a fool because he misunderstood the problem that he faced.

The man's problem was that he had no one to love more than his stuff. It is a common spiritual problem – which is why Jesus talked about it all the time. And Jesus knows that when you are overly focused on your stuff you can end up being possessed by your possessions. Is that what we want your life to be about, Jesus presses: your possessions? Or your neighbors?

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What makes the question Jesus asks more difficult is when we think about how to answer it as a community instead of only as an individual.

Our city is wrestling with Jesus' question right now.

A few blocks away, the Men's Shelter – a non-profit this church helped to start and one we support through our Christmas offering, and volunteers, and board leadership – is facing pressure to relocate for the sake of commercial development. The argument from the group that wants to develop the section of North Tryon Street where the Men's Shelter is located is that economic growth in that area is incompatible with the 400 neighbors who sleep at the shelter at night.

Our world is wrestling with Jesus' question, too.

BBC News and CNN project that later this year the richest 1% in the world will own as much as the rest of the world combined.¹

Some among us find this as evidence that our system is broken. Others see it as the normal way that system works. I'm not an economist, but I'm not really talking about the economy. I'm talking about character - and about the spiritual problem that results when our neighbors matter less than our possessions. No economic system is perfect, and I don't know of a better system than the one we practice in our country, but even free-market capitalism demands responsibility...and the ones who have the most have the most responsibilities.

I confess that when I think about how complicated the relationship is between our possessions and our neighbors I can get pretty overwhelmed. Where do you start? What can you do? How do you not get sucked into playing the game and keeping up with what is expected of you?

But the answer might be more simple than we think: practice generosity. Be a steward. It's a small act of faith – but a significant one.

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35339475>

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One of my best lessons in generosity came from an 85-year old woman named Ruth. Ruth was in my congregation in Louisiana. She had joined our church 15 years before when her congregation closed down. Ruth moved her membership to our church then, and jumped in with the Presbyterian Women, and in a Bible study, and as an usher on Sunday morning.

Early in my time at the church Ruth fell ill and was admitted to the hospital for an extended stay. The first time I visited her, we had a great conversation, and then near the end of my visit, Ruth handed me a check for \$57.00, which she told me was a weekly tithe...10%...of what she made by way of her fixed income on Social Security.

I was a little taken aback and told her that she didn't need to pay me to say a prayer with her – but she explained that since she wasn't going to be in church that Sunday she wanted to make sure I would get her tithe in the offering plate. I visited Ruth about once a week for a few months. Every time I did she would give me another check for \$57.00 for me to drop in the offering plate.

Ruth wanted to know that her life was about more than the stuff she had accumulated...even as meager an accumulation as that may be. She wanted to participate in something beyond herself. She wanted to know that her life was in support of the children who we tutored at the local elementary school, and in support of the meal that we served to the homeless and working poor on Thursday evening. Ruth wanted her life to be about teaching a third grader how to read their Bible, and making sure there were flowers in the sanctuary at the funeral of one of her friends. She wanted to be person of character who remembered that through her baptism she had some responsibilities to her neighbors. She wanted to be an active part of a church that was demonstrating the kingdom to the rest of the world.

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I think we all want that.
And it starts with practicing our faith by being generous.

Generosity is the antidote for the temptation to choose between our neighbors and our possessions.
Generosity helps us to be Christian.

The question that Jesus get at in his parable is what do we want our lives to be about? Our stuff or our neighbors?

When you get to the end of your journey, what do you want your story to tell?

Here's a homework assignment after this sermon. Think about that – and then go take a look into your barn.

You may be amazed at the difference you can make – and the difference it can make in you when your neighbor matters more than your possessions².

² I am indebted to Tom Are, Jr. for the last line of this sermon.