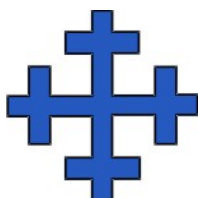


# St. Mary of the Harbor

## Provincetown, Massachusetts



Pentecost 8 C Proper 13 2019

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

### ***Luke 12: 13-21***

*Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he 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 toward God."*



## **Rich Beyond Measure**

It may be an aging thing or not, but when I was young, I wanted it all. Nowadays, I just want to get rid of it all. I'm not sure whether it is human nature or just habit or maybe a little of both, but most of us accumulate stuff, some more than others. That is why Google and Amazon and everyone else out there who wants to sell you something already knows more about you than the federal government will ever know.

While retailers, banks, insurance companies and the rest are perfectly happy to supply us with what we want, they can never provide us with what we truly desire and that is a fulfilling life. I am pretty sure that was what a man who approached Jesus was really looking for. The problem was he was looking for it in the wrong places.

It started when he approached Jesus and tried to draw him into a dispute over the family inheritance. Jesus recognized triangulation when he saw it and was having no part of it. Identifying the problem, Jesus issued a warning about the dehumanizing effect the man was buying into in his desire to divvy up the family property. To drive home the point, Jesus recounted a parable about a wealthy landowner's inventory dilemma.

Apparently the landowner's fields had yielded a bumper crop. It was so abundant that there wasn't enough room to store it all. So the landowner decided to address his

storage problem by going with the bigger is better option. With all this excess, the landowner convinced himself that he could finally kick back and relax, confident that he was set for life.

Sounds like a pretty good plan to many of us. Setting something aside in times of plenty for use when times are lean makes good sense. It is the foolish, is it not, who are not prepared for the unexpected. So does that mean that Jesus disapproves of our pensions or other investments we have made for a time when we will need them? I hope not. Otherwise, some of us are in for a rude awakening.

Fortunately, saving for a rainy day doesn't seem to be the issue with the fellow who wanted Jesus to help him get what he wanted. Jesus was pretty clear. The issue at hand had nothing to do with the family property or wealth. It had to do with greed.

Interestingly, there is a strong correlation between greed and self-centeredness. That is not my opinion. Numerous studies over the years have concluded that the more self-centered a person is, the less charitable they are toward others.

While in our culture we tend to associate greed exclusively with money, greed is not just about the acquisition of wealth. As Jesus warned, "Be on your guard against *all kinds* of greed."<sup>1</sup> That means that greed can and does take many forms. For example, greed can be about wanting power or the desire to manipulate and exert control over other people. It can be about being right, even at the expense of one's relationships with others. Greed can also manifest itself as a need to be the center of attention.

One of the more alarming forms of greed is the one that recently played out in El Paso and Dayton and many other places over the years. It is an insidious form of greed that seeks to deny the humanity of some of God's people because of the color of their skin or their ethnicity or religion. This violent form of greed finds fruition in the deep seated fear of white nationalists who perceive their privileged status is somehow diminished by anyone who is not a white, native born American. In this context, greed is not about retaining or getting something. It is about the fear of losing it to someone else.

Like many of the people who Jesus encountered, we tend to judge greedy people rather harshly. We often see them as a one dimensional caricatures who embody some of the more undesirable traits we see in ourselves. And yet, the desire for wealth or power or control or anything else you can think of, is more than just a character flaw. It is a symptom of a much deeper issue that we all suffer from to a certain extent. If you look at it from another perspective, greed is about feeling incomplete or the perception that we are somehow less than when we compare ourselves to other people.

Emotionally and spiritually, each of us needs to feel important; that we matter, that our lives have purpose and meaning. When that is missing, we instinctively look for ways to fill that void. For some of us, the accumulation of wealth or power or resentment toward other people, or some other thing becomes a substitute to fill the emptiness, even to the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:15

point that we unwittingly become emotionally dependent on it because it provides us with the illusion of fulfillment and happiness, albeit temporary.

The truth is, packed closets are less a reflection of our spending habits than they are a reflection of an emptiness within us that needs filling. True abundance, Jesus says, lies not in the accumulation of possessions but in being rich toward God. That requires a far different approach to life.

If you want to be wealthy, invest in real estate in Provincetown. But if you want to be rich toward God, invest in the things that can change someone's life, including your own. Forgive people. Be compassionate. Show mercy. Be generous. Be courageous when others remain silent. Speak out for the least, the last and the left out in this world. And instead of being afraid of death, concern yourself with the things that can provide you with a meaningful and fulfilling life.

As Jesus' parable points out, at the end of the day, greed in all of its forms will prove to be a profitless enterprise because it invariably diminishes our humanity. And no matter how you try to rationalize it, you cannot put a price on something as precious as life itself. For all the contents in our barns, basements and bank accounts combined, it is the content within the human heart that makes us rich or poor.

The truth is, our lives can never be defined by what we store up but by what we give away. And nothing we obtain or possess can fill our lives and the lives of other people with what is needed most. Only love can do that. And when it comes to love, even the smallest amount can make one rich beyond measure.

