

"Rich Toward God"
A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, August 4, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "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 bigger 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.**"
Luke 12:13-21

Will you pray with me. Abundant God, remind us in these coming moments of what it means to be rich in the best sense of the word. Teach us to live for today as if there might be no tomorrow. For neither full barns nor bulging bank accounts will secure us a place in heaven. Amen.

"Sympathy with your people, insight of their condition, a study of the moral remedies, this will give endless diversity and fertility to your subjects for sermons.... He that preaches out of a sympathy with the living will sooner exhaust the ocean or the clouds of water, than of his pulpit material." These words of wisdom were spoken by Henry Ward Beecher in 1872 in a series of lectures on preaching at Yale Divinity School. As I thought about the scripture lesson for this week, these words kept coming back to me, *"Sympathy with your people, insight of their condition, a study of the moral remedies, this will give endless diversity and fertility to your subjects for sermons."*

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Bible to me is that words of insight written two to four thousand years ago about the human condition, with all its frailties and weaknesses, can ring as true today as they did then. People were drawn to possessions rather than to one another, just as they are now. People turned away from the eternal love of God and toward the immediacy of physical comfort, just as they do now. The size of one's barn, the security of the locks on one's doors, the desire to look out for one's self rather than one's neighbors were as prevalent then as they are now.... common "facts of life."

And yet, there were prophets, then as now, who could say, "But wait, all is not lost. Good does happen in the world. Incredible human acts of kindness do occur. God does intervene in the least expected moments."

Our scripture passage for this morning speaks to this contrast between God's all encompassing love for humanity and the on-going quest of human beings, since the beginning it seems, to find security and happiness in things other than God's love.

I wrote about this text in my "Summer meditation" this week on Thursday, and received several lengthy responses to my meditation. Questioning folks about their "material possessions" can lead to some squirming and even some embarrassing confessions!

I know because I squirm around this text and have to confess to myself I have WAY too many possessions I hold dear. My mother's wedding ring is never far from my sight. I always know where it is if it's not on my finger. I remember saying to my father in his retirement years, as he tallied up his stock values after reading the *Wall Street Journal* each morning, "Pop, what are you going to do, take it with you?" And he always half smiled. I have no idea what he was thinking. BUT his investing and saving and passing it on to his three children allowed me to go to seminary for four years and not have to work while I was studying the Scriptures and learning how to preach and lead worship. So I have to confess my Pop's loading his barn up with good investments paid a good dividend in my life....

God says to the rich man in the parable, "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." (Lk 12:20-21) How do we become "rich toward God?" How do we stop "storing up treasures for ourselves?" It is easier said than done. As a "preacher with great sympathy," to use Henry Ward Beecher's terms, I find myself pointing these questions as much to myself as to you.

Jesus taught in parables two thousand years ago to make many points about living in good relation with God rather than in good relation with our material possessions. Much of what we, Americans, take for granted as necessities today were luxuries yesterday and unheard of even ten or twenty years ago. "Please, don't take my backup camera in my car away! I don't think I could live without it now!" But I DID live without it five years ago!

When I was in Russia in 1994, I met women who saved single napkins and any pieces of paper from one meal to the next because of the severe shortage of any type of paper products. In Novorossiysk, in the south of Russia, these women had to do all of their washing and bathing and cooking within a six hour period every day because the water was only turned on in the city three hours in the morning and three hours in the evening due to crumbling water pipes.

I came home to wealthy retired clients who complained to me that they had made too much money on their investments the prior year and they were going to have to pay more taxes. What was I, their Certified Financial Planner, going to do about that? I was so stunned when asked that question by a wealthy retired doctor, right after I had returned from Russia, that I didn't say anything. What I should have said was, "I know of a few charities who could help you with your 'problem,' doctor." What I did several months later was come to my senses and realize there was something wrong with my internal picture screen. I needed to change channels in my life. I started seminary in 1995.

I heard a while back of a commencement speech in which Kurt Vonnegut told a story of an author at a party given by a multibillionaire. Vonnegut asked the author

whether it bothered him that his host had probably made more money the day before than his most popular novel had grossed in forty years. The author replied in the negative saying, "I have something he can never have -- the knowledge that I have enough." In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus says to us, "Relax. You have enough. A bigger barn won't help. Trust God. Trust me." (This paragraph was written by Melinda Reagor Flannery in the August, 1998 issue of *Homily Service*)

How will we know when we have enough, and not too much? And once we recognize that, will we remember it the next time we go to buy another program for the computer, another kitchen appliance, another sweater, another 12-pack of yellow legal pads, just in case we might run out of paper?

Just in case I die tonight -- what do I need to buy or do this afternoon? It's probably much more important that I DO than that I BUY. But it's hard to trust that that is so. It's hard to keep Jesus' words in mind, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Lk 12:15)

Buckminster Fuller, the deeply spiritual inventor of the geodesic dome, maintained in his lectures and books that God created a universe in which there is enough. He asserted that it is human beings who change the nature of matter so that it can become inaccessible. (This paragraph was written by Judith E. Simonson in the August, 1998 issue of *Homily Service*)

What part can each of us play in making the world's riches available to more of those in need rather than to those of in want? I don't have a good answer to that question. And I must admit to you that this has been a difficult sermon to write because it has caused me to reflect so heavily upon my own physical abundance and good fortune. As the Psalmist has written, "The boundary lines *have* fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage." (Ps 16:6)

Each of us must resolve in our hearts and minds what our role is to be in life. Each of us must come to our own conclusions concerning what's important in our lives today and what matters over the long run. Perhaps we simply need to keep in mind Jesus' words of the false security of "the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15) when making decisions about what to buy and what to do. Perhaps, then, we will come closer to being "rich toward God." (Lk 12:21)

Let us prepare to receive the Lord's Supper. Let the people say, "Amen."