

**WHAT IS A LIFE?; LUKE 12: 13-21; JULY 31, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY;
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

A few years ago after I crashed in a mountain bike event my brother in law asked me if I finally had enough of that stuff; when I said no and that I intended to enter the same race the next year, he said, matter of factly, not missing a beat: “then I suggest you increase your term insurance”; which, actually, I did.

I remember also how my mentor, friend and fellow Presbyterian pastor David McFarlane and I used to joke about being worth more dead than alive given the insurance policies we purchased as young husbands and fathers.

But today’s Scripture lesson says that life is about more than our insurance policies, stocks and bonds and whatever other liquid or material assets we might have.

Jesus tells a story about a wealthy man, a 1percenter, who has fabulous resources and possessions; on top of it, he is now getting even richer after turning in a bumper crop beyond all expectation. Think CEO stock bonus or hedge-fund manager.

The man reflects on what he should do with his burgeoning stockpile of wealth. In this scene, he is taking his own counsel; he is talking to himself; perhaps because he thinks he is smarter than everyone else; he may be under the illusion of the popular belief then, that being blessed with material wealth conveyed God’s blessing and special endorsement; so that the more wealth you had, the more wonderful and favored you were.

Why would he trust anyone else for counsel? He could not have acquired so much wealth to begin with if he were not a very wise man. There is a contemporary political figure who thinks this way as well. And so we are presented with the ridiculous picture of a person who says to himself that he will tear down his existing barns and build new supersized barns to house everything he has – rich fool that he is.

David Brooks who has been covering both national political conventions has written insightfully regarding the possible platforms of the candidates. In his Friday column he offers advice to Mrs. Clinton that speaks to the misconception that the current national discontent, that Bernie Sanders could not control and Donald Trump hopes to ride into the White House, can be solved with economic solutions alone.

Over the past few years, economic and social anxiety, Brooks says, has metastasized into something spiritual and existential. Americans are no longer confident in their national project. They no longer trust their institutions or have faith in their common destiny, he continues.

This is a crisis of national purpose. It’s about personal identity and the basic health of communal life. Americans’ anger and pessimism are more fundamental than anything that can be explained by G.D.P. statistics. Brooks says many politicians have difficulty thinking this way. When asked to explain any complex phenomenon they reduce it to material terms. If there’s terrorism there must be lack of economic opportunity. If marriage is declining it must be because of joblessness.

But a much more profound longing and hunger are driving the dystopian fervor pulsating cross the nation as well as the request of the brother in the lesson today who approaches Jesus at the beginning of the lesson and asks him to mediate with his brother to divide the family inheritance.

On the one hand, Brooks' analysis of broken institutions, lack of trust and existential angst regarding personal identity and national purpose is spot on. Another way to say it might be that the long-standing American dream that if we work hard enough we will do better than our parents has faltered. We were raised to believe that with hard work we would be able to provide a better life for our families; insure our freedom in retirement; make sure that we are not a burden on our children in our old age; and give our children opportunities we did not have.

What we think we're getting with material success is security, control over our future, a happy retirement, and inheritance for our children. Unfortunately, the money, for all the good it gets us, cannot provide security, control over the future, a happy retirement, or gifted children. Money gives us the illusion not the reality.

Hence that deeper longing and hunger. We are spiritually wired beings. What we long for is more satisfying but also more subtle and perhaps even ordinary than the latest luxury car, European excursion, or even a debt-free future.

In fact, if we do not satisfy this deeper spiritual longing we will try to feed the inner void and become voracious consumers like the great white shark in the movie *Jaws* who was opened up and found to have eaten other fish, a kitchen blender and a Florida license plate; or we will search endlessly for some holy grail of comfort or status; like the woman I knew at the beginning of my ministry who moved into a new home every two or three years fixing it to opulent perfection then moving again; 'she's never satisfied or happy,' her sister told me, 'she can't find what she's looking for.'

We currently live with the paradox of an unprecedented Gilded Age of conspicuous consumption driven by a widening wealth gap while millions in the middle class struggle to hold on and search for some illusive purpose and security in an unfriendly economy.

We think our goal should be to accumulate full barns; a fat retirement account, a happy family, children whose futures are secure – all as insurance against life's vicissitudes. We think we're supposed to build an economic fence around life. "You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years," the rich fool says to himself. "Therefore, take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!"

For those who have the capacity to do so if that is all they have to look forward to they are in for a rude awakening. And for those who struggle to stay fiscally afloat and blame the demise of the American dream, they are only half right.

Which brings us back to Jesus addressing the man who asks him to enter into his family dispute and tell the man's brother to share the family inheritance.

While Jesus declines the man's request for mediation, he tells the parable of the rich fool but says first, as a warning, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And he ends the parable with God interrupting the rich fool's monologue, "You fool!" God says, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

"So it is," Jesus concludes, "with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

As it turns out, the man did not own his possessions, his possessions owned him. His planning for the future, to ensure his leisure for years to come, was precious time foolishly wasted calculating the dimensions of more barns.

In a death-denying culture William Willimon says, "it is easy for us to become deluded, to look upon our lives as our property, to attempt to manage and control our future as if our future is in our hands; it is easy to have an exaggerated sense of our own power."

Then we come to church and hear a story like this. The rich fool is one of us, he has earned his wealth without graft or greed, we assume he has treated his workers justly, they may even sing his praises for the annual company BBQ he throws at Darien Lake. Is God's language too harsh? Is there a less offensive term to describe the man?

The psalmist says 'fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God,'; there's just me, myself, and my management of my achievements. There is no gift, no grace. There's no transcendent, external higher claim laid upon me and my possessions other than my own comfort, contentment, and pleasure.

Unlike some of Jesus' other parables no one is punished here – unless reality, that is, the results or consequences of our actions can be called punishment. The intruding voice of God only describes what is to happen – the man will die tonight, and then his possessions will no longer be his.

The intruding voice of God can either be considered harsh or the welcome warning of a larger truth. I am always taken aback by those averse to the confession of sin; with all of the man-made tragedy and heartache in the world how could we not realize our own hand in the troubles that befall us? Bad things happen to good people; but that does not absolve us of all the misfortune and injustice in the world.

The verses that immediately follow today's lesson are among the most beautiful passages in the New Testament – Jesus' meditation on trusting God.

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

"Consider the lilies of the field, Solomon in all of his glory was not arrayed as one of these. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! Strive instead for the kingdom heaven and these things will be given to you."

Really? Strive for the kingdom of heaven? Become rich in God? Could this advice possibly be as important as which stocks to purchase or bonds to acquire?

It's not an 'either or' is it? Of course, material wealth requires responsible management. That's not what the lesson is about. If today's admonition from Jesus and Luke means anything, it means that vigilance is necessary for our spiritual health and well-being in the realm of the material just as much as that of the spirit. Money is a spiritual issue.

We are surrounded by a culture that would lull our faith to sleep; pat it on the head and say – that's all very nice but life in the real world requires more aggression, more looking out for Number One; therefore, keep your biblical values and lessons for Sunday, study them if you like, but when it comes to Monday morning, when it comes to cutting business deals or negotiating contracts then you're dealing with reality. Let me borrow a term from Joe Biden for that argument: malarkey.

Strive for the kingdom of heaven. Become rich in God. Trust the one who cares for you vastly more than he does for the birds of the air who have adequate food and the flowers of the field that he arrays with such beauty. Are you are not more important than these?

What it finally boils down to is putting ourselves on the line; either we can pull back and hoard or open up and share; we can let our fears shut us down or we can trust and risk, confident that what we need will be provided if we keep the greatest commandment to love God and serve our neighbor with all of our strength and heart and soul and money and possessions.

On August 22 we will celebrate the life of Betty Ott. If you want to know what 'striving for the kingdom of God looks like" – I give you Betty who was here every Sunday, who thrilled at the music and service of worship, who supported our young people and who endured more loss than one person should have in a lifetime, yet was one of the most cheerful Christians I have ever encountered. Her energy and good will were compelling evidence of the treasure she had stored up in heaven.

We'll be talking about Betty Ott for years to come, the rich fool – if he is remembered at all will be associated with of the irony of his life: great wealth and no where to go.

There is a higher claim upon our lives and possessions.

We belong to the Creator of heaven and earth. What we do with what we've been given matters eternally. It starts each day by loosening our grip on the precious time, talent and treasure we have and asking God where we can use them for Jesus' sake and the kingdom of heaven.
Amen.