

Fleeting Temples

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13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “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.” (NRSV)

When I was 7 years old, I wanted an American Girl doll. I don’t know how, but American Girl catalogs seemed to magically appear at the houses of little girls around age 5 or 6 or 7...and I was captivated by them. An early interest in history combined with a nurturing spirit that resulted in my dolls and stuffed animals having complex inner lives contributed to an inescapable desire to have one of these dolls as my very own. Maybe Felicity, the doll with Scottish ancestry from Revolutionary times would be perfect for me! Or Samantha, from the Victorian era, whose fashion I found intoxicatingly gorgeous.

But American Girl dolls were not just toys. They were status symbols. In my 7 year old mind, the coolest, prettiest girls *all* had American Girl dolls. One friend even had an American Girl doll-themed birthday party, to which all of the guests were invited to bring *their* American Girl dolls and play and dress them up together. I was invited...but I didn’t have the doll. There was something about possessing that doll that made the other girls belong. Even though I was well-liked and friendly to everyone, it felt like something was missing. I wanted to have that doll so that I, too, could belong. By having this doll, I felt that I would *be* enough.

What is it about material possessions that gives us comfort? What is it about our society that how much money we have, what type of home we live in, where we shop has so much to do with how others see us...and how we see ourselves? In many Western countries, and especially in the USA, people tend to (I’ll be honest, *I tend to*) seek security through our possessions. As I reflect now on my desire to have an American Girl Doll, I realize I was seeking a

false sense of security to assure me of my worthiness and beloved-ness. That kind of security is not gained by possessions, but our society encourages us to think so. We love the appearance of wealth, the ability to spend and to have more, to supersize and maximize, to pursue what we are told is happiness--owning things. Stuff. Maybe if we buy that new dress or those new shoes or that new model of mountain bike or the vacation home or the Tesla, maybe *then* our life will feel ok. In some ways, many of us worship our possessions, insuring them and buying home security systems to protect them. Maybe once we have the American Girl doll then *we* will feel ok.

But what is enough? How do you know when you have enough? Certainly those who live, as Howard Thurman put it, with their "backs up against the wall" know that if you have to ask that question, you probably already live comfortably.

This is where the rich fool comes in. He has a great big overabundant harvest and realizes it won't all fit in the barns that already exist. The barns have worked every other year to store the harvest from his land and provide him a lasting supply, but not this year! What will he do? He consults with the wisest person he knows--his own self! The rich landowner talks to himself and wonders how to solve his problem of abundance. "I know!" he says, "I will tear down the barns I have now and build bigger ones so I can accommodate all of this bounty! Then I can rest easy knowing I stored all my goods and possessions and will always have enough to eat, drink and be merry!" This sounds like a great plan to him...until God comes in and throws a wet blanket on all of the rich man's fine scheming. And to be honest, God seems pretty miffed at this dude. God says, "You fool! You were so preoccupied with your wealth that you forgot that your life is not guaranteed! When you die tonight, what will become of all of your treasures? Bet you didn't think about that, did you?" At first glance, some might not "get" the parable...after all, parables were Jesus' favorite, and most confusing, storytelling methods. Some might ask what's so wrong about planning for the future? What's wrong about storing up an abundant harvest? What's wrong about wanting to have a comfortable life? Is it just me, or is this parable getting a *leeeeeeeetle* too close for comfort? Y'all, I hear ya! *This* is why parables are so confusing...because they invite, even *drag*, us into the story, forcing us to ask these same questions about our own lives.

So let's get back to the bones of this story. Jesus is sharing this parable because a person called out to him to make a decision about how an inheritance would be divided. Jesus replied

that he was not the one to arbitrate, but also that wealth and material goods should not be our chief concern in life. And to illustrate his point, he introduces this story about a rich man. Note that the man in the parable *starts out* rich. In first-century Palestine, there was pretty much a zero-sum economy. If one person gains, someone else is sure to have lost. Palestine, which was under the rule of the Roman Empire governed through local puppet governments, was taxed doubly...first a 12.5% tax was due to the Empire and then the Temple, often the location of local governance, was due tithes, offerings and sacrifices...add on to that land leases and renting from local elites...and there wasn't much keeping wages for the common folk. So the subject of the parable is a rich man at the beginning of this story...not to mention how rich he is *after* the windfall harvest! Rohun Park, considering this Scripture in his 2011 dissertation entitled *The Challenge of Economy*, asserts that the rich man controlled enough land and people *before* the ginormous harvest so that he was already successful. Park says, due to the socioeconomic situation of first century Palestine, we can assume that "the harvest he has acquired is indeed a consequence of exploitation."¹

The windfall harvest is presented as an amazing gift, a blessing that exceeds expectations over and above all of the work and resources that went into the crop in the first place. Some of you may remember from our Bible study sessions in Adult Learning that the Gospel of Luke is famously skeptical of wealth and wealthy people, and this story is no different. Park adds on to this, "In the Gospel tradition, everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar or to any human being."² And so the rich landowner proves himself the fool because he doesn't question the economic system that put him in an advantageous position in the first place. To add to that, the bountiful harvest was made possible by God, the Creator and Sustainer of the land and the harvest...and yet the rich man, entrapped unquestioningly in an unjust, zero-sum system, does not bother to consider God's role in this blessing! Instead, quite the opposite happens...David Lose writes, "The relentless use of the first person pronouns "I" and "my" betray a preoccupation with self. There is no thought to using the abundance to help others, no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, no recognition of God at all. The farmer has fallen prey to worshipping the most popular of gods: the Unholy Trinity of "me, myself, and I." This

¹ Park 77.

² Park 86.

leads to, and is most likely caused by, a second mistake. He is not foolish because he makes provision *for* the future; he is foolish because he believes that by his wealth he can *secure* his future: ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”³

But the security that the rich man seeks makes him a fool. Though he had many great plans about what he would do with his abundance, God informs him that his life will end that very night. This is not to say that God *killed or made it so that the man would die* but that God, as the Author of life and death, knew that the rich man’s plans for his own wellbeing were futile. There is no planning for the future without considering and collaborating with God.

God then asks another poignant question, “What will become of your beloved possessions after you die?” The man had made no mention in his self-serving soliloquy about a family or friends or community, about any neighbors or poor people to whom he could leave his wealth. Presumably, the land and stores and barns would be left to the Empire upon the man’s death...and Luke’s Gospel doesn’t look kindly at the Empire continuing to enlarge its economic power.

Perhaps this rich fool could benefit from seeing that historic play, *You Can’t Take It with You*, about a post-Depression-era family who won’t sell their house to a successful banker-turned-munitions-monopoly who wants to buy land in that neighborhood to put a competitor’s factory out of business. Little does the banker know that his son has fallen in love with, and intends to marry, a member of the family who lives in the house that won’t sell. The eccentric grandfather, Grandpa Vanderhof, repeatedly tells his story about working in business, realizing he wasn’t happy, and leaving it all behind to collect stamps and go to the zoo and spend time with his grandchildren. Leaving business proves financially detrimental to his family but also encourages them to pursue an engaged and loving life with family and friends. After a whole bunch of drama, Grandpa gets in the same room as the banker, Mr. Kirby, tells him he ought to go out and make some friends, and utters those famous lines... “maybe it’d stop you trying to be so desperate about making more money than you can ever use? You can’t take it with you, Mr. Kirby. So what good is it? As near as I can see, the only thing you can take with you is the love of your friends.”⁴

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=720

⁴ [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/You_Can%27t_Take_It_with_You_\(film\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/You_Can%27t_Take_It_with_You_(film))

And it's true, right? You *can't* take it with you! The rich fool learned this lesson the hard way...he spent all his time building up his wealth and benefitting from the exploitation of common laborers and neglected to consider God's role in the blessing of a bountiful harvest...he forgot that his life was not his own. This parable echoes of Ecclesiastes', that old book of wisdom, which repeatedly reminds us that "All is vanity." That text reminds us that there is a time for everything, a place for everything in the circle of life, and that pursuing possessions and wealth and status are all meaningless...these things carry no cosmic meaning at the end of our lives when we return to the dust from which we were born. Ecclesiastes tells 7-year-old Anita: "The belonging that you seek will not come through gaining this special doll. Trust that you are loved just as you are."

And yet, the trap that causes us to hoard our assets and seek security in materiality, that trap of consumerism is so alluring. Elisabeth Johnson writes, "Our reality is that no matter how much we have, we are always aware of things we don't have. We are bombarded by marketing wizards whose job it is to convince us of all the products we need to complete our lives. And so we never quite feel that we have enough. Like the rich farmer, we are tempted to think that having large amounts of money and possessions stored up will make us secure. Sooner or later, however, we learn that no amount of wealth or property can secure our lives. No amount of wealth can protect us from a genetically inherited disease, for instance, or from a tragic accident. No amount of wealth can keep our relationships healthy and our families from falling apart. In fact, wealth and property can easily drive a wedge between family members, as in the case of the brothers fighting over their inheritance at the beginning of this text."⁵

And so this story, this parable from Jesus and the frame in which he tells it, are stories about priorities. These are stories about idolatry. These are stories about how humans seek control in order to stave off loneliness, grief, existential fear. These are stories that invite us to examine where our true security lies, where our sense of belonging really comes from. True belonging comes only in the fullest sense when we are conspiring with God for the good of the world; when we are living each day caring not only about our own self-sufficiency but practicing seeing the *imago Dei* (the image of God) in each other and concluding that we must labor together for a just world to be birthed. Because *we can't* take it with us, especially in times like

⁵ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1725

these, when there are so many needs all around us-- among those of us right here, today. Preacher and activist Shane Claiborne says this in his book *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?*: “God’s people are not to accumulate stuff for tomorrow but to share indiscriminately with the scandalous and holy confidence that God will provide for tomorrow.”⁶

I ask you, Church, where does our security come from? From our building? From our wealth, evident in tithes contributed? From our history, which tells the story of our communal identity? Does our security come from knowing and being known, loving and being loved just as we are within this community?

And friends, I feel I would be amiss if I didn’t acknowledge that we went to bed last night to the news of a mass shooting in an El Paso Wal-Mart. And that we woke this morning to news of a mass shooting, less than 13 hours later, in a neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio. Many people in this country seek security through guns, and the right to have them is protected by legislators who seek security in military might that can be propelled into action by USAmerican nationalism. White supremacy is nothing but fearful, privileged people seeking security, systematized. And the shooting in El Paso, like many before, and sadly, many yet to come, we must name as white supremacist terrorism, because we must name the false security of supremacy when we see it. We must name evil out loud when we see it. Grievously, the security many in this country seek have dangerous sides that infringe, if not totally destroy, the security of others.

Friends, we can’t talk about security without talking about sanctuary. Many of you may have seen a video released about two weeks ago of neighbors in Hermitage, Tennessee, a suburb of Nashville, forming a human circle to protect an undocumented father and his son from being apprehended by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, aided by Metro Nashville Police. The neighbors, linked by hands, arm in arm, knew that policies, money, police, and government don’t make security a reality. The neighbors sang, prayed and talked to the father and son, who were inside their van outside their home. The neighbors delivered water to the father and son, delivered gasoline so that they could keep the AC running amid the 95-degree weather as they fought to keep their family together. Some of my friends were among those

⁶ Shane Claiborne, *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?*

holding hands with neighbors, and the message many of them shared on social media and via text message was from Movements Including X, the group that trained the community to take action: The resounding message was “the truest sanctuary is an organized community.”⁷

And so today, I invite you to meditate on the rich fool, a first-century Scrooge who was not redeemed by finding community and sharing his wealth as Dickens’ villian did. I invite you to consider the brother who called out to Jesus to make an arbitration about the inheritance he was due. I invite you to let go of whatever you are holding onto that gives you a false sense of security, whether it is the goods you own, the privileges you were born into, Christian superiority...it could be many things. Let go, and instead store up what Luke’s Gospel called “treasures in heaven” by seeking the security only found in community that comes together to honor the image of God in the Other; the security only found in a group bound together as they seek to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. I call on you to seek this sanctuary of human-and-Divine-relationship, of abundance and gratitude and grace, in the most mundane places, each and every day.

Perhaps it is not in dramatic soliloquies and bountiful windfalls and complex parables that we find expressions of security that resonate with our own lives. Perhaps it is in the simplicity of human relationships, the kind that I wish the rich fool had experienced, the kind that eschew greed and goods, that we find the deepest meanings of life together. To this end, I leave you with the words of poet Danusha Lameris, called “Small Kindnesses:”⁸

“I’ve been thinking about the way, when you walk
Down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
To let you by. Or how strangers still say “bless you”
When someone sneezes, a leftover
From the Bubonic plague. “Don’t die,” we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
From your grocery bag, someone else will help you

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/mixnashville/>

⁸ <http://singingbowl.org/so-far-from-tribe-and-fire/>

Pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We wanted to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
And to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
At them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
To call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
And for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
From tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
Fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
Have my seat," "Go ahead--you first," "I like your hat."

May it ever be so.

Blessing:

May God bless you with a restless **discomfort**
about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy **anger**
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of **tears**
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish,
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough **foolishness**
to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,
so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

