

Wall Street United Church, August 3, 2025

Luke 12:13-21 - The Parable of the Rich Fool

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.’”

Opening Prayer

Creator, Life of life, Soul of souls,

Open our hearts to the prompting of your spirit as we come with our longing and our hopes to meet you in words and songs of faith.

We are here because you have called us and we responded with our presence.

Meet us where we are and give us courage to see how much we need you.

Help us trust you, Merciful One, as you turn us away from the ways of the world, again and again, so we can follow the way of Jesus.

Loving Teacher, be in my words, may they be true and faithful to the gospel, and may our understandings be a blessing to you. AMEN

A woman I knew got a rather unexpected bequest when her grandmother died: — her gold teeth! The gold was probably worth quite a bit, but she would rather have had it as jewelry!

Jesus is teaching a huge crowd of people, when he is interrupted: *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!”* Jesus has just been raging against lawyers, so how ironic that someone asks him to give advice about estate

laws! Jesus refuses to be drawn in: *“Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”* He warns him: *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”* Like a good Jewish teacher, he answers a question with a question, then he tells a story.

A rich man has saved carefully, invested well, and now, in his old age, he has more than he could ever need. He has spent his life making deals, getting the best price for grain, investing in the market so he can multiply his earnings. He has so much wealth that he needs to build more shelters to hold it all! He is set up for life. And he is content: *“And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink be merry.”* To be fair to this old guy, it sounds like a sound financial plan. Many of us would be quite content to know we had enough savings to last for the rest of our lives.

I have some sympathy for the guy who asked Jesus to help him with his father’s estate. My father died in April, and my brother and I are both executors of the estate. Except we aren’t called executors anymore ... now we are *trustees*. I like this change: instead of executing, we are involved in the work of trust. Banks use language that should invite us into generosity: Mutual funds, and trust funds, even bank “accounts”—we are accountable for how we use our money. This is true on an individual scale and on a global scale. We are accountable to our soul, our neighbour, our earth and to God. ***“Jesus, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”*** Tell our leaders to share the family inheritance, before you claim: *“This is OURS> >OUR RESOURCES> OUR WEALTH.* Before they build more and more barns to hoard the wealth that is a gift, not a birthright! Tell them to share!

The rich man is content, and leaning into his good fortune, when God interrupts him: *“You fool! This very night you will die. And what good will all your wealth and treasures be to you then?”*

A parable has a clear meaning, but then when we turn it upside down, or look at the story from a different angle, we see a deeper meaning. Sometimes it is almost the opposite of the obvious meaning. *“Don’t be greedy,”* is the obvious meaning of the parable. We are not surprised to be told, don’t hoard your wealth. But what does it mean *“to be rich before God?”*

Dame Cicely Saunders came from a wealthy, unhappy home. It was her dream to be a nurse, but her father insisted that she go to Oxford. After World War 2, she left Oxford and achieved a “war degree” and in 1947, she became a nurse. Cicely was agnostic, but one summer, when she was on holidays with some Christian friends, she had an experience that changed her life: She describes it as if a switch was flipped, a conversion that brought her to Christian faith.

While caring for a Polish Jewish emigre named David Tasma, they discussed her idea of opening a hospice. She was convinced that in dying, people deserve to be treated with dignity, compassion and respect. She introduced the concept of “total pain”—acknowledging, and therefore treating, physical, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of distress. When David Tasma died, he left her money to give her a start in building a hospice for the dying. “I’ll be a window in your home,” he prophesied. In 1967, St. Christopher’s Hospice in London was opened, with 54 beds of patients in their final days. Cicely Saunders is recognized as the founder of the Hospice Movement and establishing the discipline and culture of palliative care.

Many of us have had the blessing of accompanying a loved one in the final days of their life in the Palliative Care Ward at Brockville General Hospital. The culture of compassion, care and dignity are not just for the patient. Caregivers, doctors and nurses treat the whole family. Everyone is going through the transition, and death gathers them together in the mystery. In the end, it doesn’t matter if the patient is rich or poor. We leave life the way we come into life — with nothing.

The rich man is a fool for thinking he had everything he needs. ***“So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich before God.”***

This is where we turn the parable upside down. To be rich before God, we must be willing to be poor. Poor in spirit. Vulnerable — dependent on God’s providence.

In the practice of meditation, or contemplative prayer, we spend time in silence, inwardly repeating our mantra. It is not juicy with spiritual riches, or deep with insight. The twenty minutes we spend in silence is an exercise in spiritual poverty. We spend our time just sitting in the presence of God. Nothing is required of us—

except that we bring our whole self to the meditation and just make ourselves available. Whatever happens in our souls is up to God.

The rich fool thought he was completely self-sufficient. He had more than he could ever need. But in the end, he had nothing. For many of us, the idea of being “needy” is horrifying—yet in a life of faith, this need, this dependence is the basis of a relationship of love and grace with God. We are rich because we are entirely dependent on God. We are rich when we trust our lives to God’s leading.

God calls us and equips us to serve. We can trust this. God asks us to share our gifts with the world. The good news is: Sharing our gifts makes us very rich, because we are drawing from a deep well of Spirit, that gives us fullness of life, and shapes us into the person we are created to be. We can look at our lives and say with delight: “Oh, Soul, eat drink and be merry. All is well!” Praise God from whom all blessings flow! We can’t take credit for this bounty. God gives us many gifts.

God calls us and equips us to serve. This is usually risky, because Jesus calls us to stretch beyond our comfort zone. He uses a different currency than the world’s riches. Everything is based on trust and mercy. When it is much easier to say, “*I’m not artistic/musical/talented*” than to risk creativity, Jesus calls us to stretch beyond our ego and go deeper into ways of experiencing God’s gifts. Just try.

When it is much easier to hoard our righteous anger than to reach out and open ourselves to rejection and hurt, Jesus calls us to apologize and forgive. We have to trust that this will lead to healing, even when we don’t feel it yet.

This is the poverty that makes us rich before God. We come needing Christ to help us. “*Jesus Christ, have mercy.*” This is embedded in the language in French. “***Merci***,” we say —Thank you! This comes from the same root. God has provided what we need. *Merci*.

For centuries, Christians have used the mantra: “*Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner*” as a way to stay centered when the world gets wonky, and we are tempted to be impatient or judgmental. I recommend this short prayer. Keep it in your

pocket. Say it often. Let it accompany you and you will always be rich. Call for God's mercy. We can't manage on our own.

We tend to imagine the rich man's sin as greed, or pride. He hoarded his wealth and he prided himself on his self-sufficiency. But maybe the real sin—the folly that made Jesus call him a rich fool—was fear. He lived with so much fear of the future that he couldn't live from day to day, without worrying about what might happen. He couldn't trust that a generous heart leads to freedom. He lived in a constant state of “*What if...?*”

We have an alternative that gives us freedom. Instead of fear, we respond to life with confidence that rests secure in trust and gratitude: “Yes, all will be well, by God's grace.” This is our inheritance, our blessing, and our legacy in Christ. Spend it, share it, trust it—what a gift!

This week I invite you to ask yourself this question: “What makes me rich toward God?” The easy answers will come when you look around at the beauty of the summer skies, and the abundance of fruit and flowers, and our wonderful community of faith.

But ask yourself this question when your heart is heavy, when the world is making you weary, when your body is aching and you face some hard times ahead. Ask this question when you feel exhausted and afraid and alone. What makes me rich before God?

This is when you will find the true answer. You are rich when you are poor, when you can't manage without God, when only Christ can reassure you that your life has meaning. This is the way of the cross. We are rich, not because we are successful or self-sufficient, but because our insufficiency makes space for God to fill our lives. God's love makes us rich. Accepting this love, spending it with our whole hearts, and trusting that there is always more than enough — this makes us rich before God.

The world needs us to spend this love every day. This is how God's economy works. Be a fool for Christ and SPEND THIS LOVE WITH JOY! *Merci, grace a Dieu*—thanks be to God!

Land Acknowledgment

In her book, *The Serviceberry*, Indigenous author and botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer tells a story about an anthropologist and a linguist studying a hunter-gatherer community in the Brazilian rain forest. The hunter made a sizable kill, far too much to be eaten by his family. He asked him how he would store the meat for the future. Would he smoke it or dry it?

The hunter looked puzzled.

He was planning a great feast for all the people in the community.

“I store my meat in the belly of my brother,” he explained.

This is a gift economy. Abundance is shared. The wonderful gifts of earth—her fruit, grain, shade, water: these are not resources to be hoarded and commodified. We are rich when our neighbour is well-fed, when our rivers are clean and our skies are clear.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the calls to action, asks us to acknowledge the land, and the history of abuse, of Indigenous peoples and of the way of life that lives in kindred relationship with Earth.

Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples

Offering Invitation:

Nothing that we have is ours because we deserve it or have a right to own it. All life is a gift. If we have plenty, then we have the freedom to share widely. If we have barely enough to manage, then we have the freedom to trust that God will provide, and even if we have only a little to share, we are rich when we are generous.

Our culture and financial viability as church are based on the gift economy. We share so we can participate in God’s work in the world. This is what makes us rich, and so we share the abundance through our offering.

Prayer:

Gracious and Holy God,

May these gifts we offer praise you and bless our world.

May our lives reflect your spirit of abundance and generosity.

In Christ you give us life, and love and all we need to serve you.

May our gifts reflect your gifts of life in Christ. AMEN