

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

This particular piece of scripture that we just heard.....the story of the rich man with the bumper crop and no adequate way to store it all.....and Jesus' rebuke of him as a 'fool'.....has always left me a bit uncomfortable and squirming in my seat.

Like many of you, I was taught that I should be responsible with money. I should budget and save and put away something for an emergency or for my old age. I should work hard, pay my bills, invest what I could, share what I have and give a portion of it away. Is God going to be angry with me and call me a fool if I have a roof over my head and food to eat and have been wise in how I managed my money?

Money is almost always hard to talk about. Such conversations tend to make everyone a bit uncomfortable and squirming a bit in their seats, but money and how we view money, is very central to all of us. It's the means of survival. Jesus talked about money more often than any other subject, so he must have been trying to tell us something about how we view money.....and attitudes that we have about money and the assumptions that we make about money or the lack of it. Jesus seems to want us to examine what money means to us.....how we make decisions about how we will use the money that we have.....and what those decisions reflect about our relationship with God.

The stories that Jesus tells us about money never condemn people for having money. That's an important point to remember. Jesus had followers who were wealthy and who materially supported his ministry. He couldn't have done what he did without their support. Jesus tells us, too, about the parable of the three talents.....the one who buried it out of fear; the one who doubled it; and the one who invested it and made even more. And we all know the story in the Old Testament about Joseph in Egypt and his advice to the Pharaoh to store the bumper crops in the good times in order to be able to feed people during the famine. God, apparently, is not opposed to saving up something for a rainy day. And when Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven" he follows up immediately by saying that "with God, all things are possible."

So what *is* the message about money?

Maybe it's worth it to us to take a look at some of the meanings that we attach to money.

Several decades ago there was a catchy little bumper sticker that got a lot of attention. It said simply, "He who dies with the most toys wins." It didn't take too long for a parody of that bumper sticker to show up which said, "He who dies with the most toys.....still dies." Point made.

We live in America. We love our toys. We can't wait to be the first one on the block to get the.....FILL IN THE BLANK WITH WHATEVER THE LATEST HOT ITEM MIGHT BE. When I was living in one room in a dorm at Virginia Theological Seminary, I can remember saying, "When I graduate, I'm going to get a TV the size of Texas." And I did. Only problem is, I hardly ever watch it.

Most of us have had the experience of wanting something in particular.....a new car that's fancier than the one we have, me with the TV the size of Texas, a bigger and grander house, a vacation to an exotic place we've always wanted to see, and of course there are the toys that we want.....the things that will amuse and entertain us and make us feel good.

Well, now. There's an important discovery. Wanting things that make us feel good. Money makes it possible for us to have those things. And most of us have had the experience of actually being able to buy something that we have longed for.....knowing that having it will make us happy.....and for a little while, it does. But we've probably also had the experience of realizing in a few months that the 'shiny' has worn off and the happy feelings are gone. The happiness over possessing the object of our desire eventually leaves us feeling empty and longing for something else. So we find out that the material things that we want to possess do not ultimately provide us with the inner and sustainable joy that we seek.

There are other meanings that we attach to money as well. In our culture, and probably in most cultures, having enough money implies that we are good at the work we do. We are valued and we get paid to do the work we do. Often, when we do it well, we get paid more money. It's the way that our employers tell us that we're doing a good job and is more tangible than verbal praise. So money, in many cases, is the currency through which we can measure how competent we are.....and having our competency validated improves our self-esteem and our self-confidence. The mental equation goes like this: "I'm getting paid well. I must be OK." For younger people just starting their careers, this endorsement can mean so much. It can also provide the way for them to be independent from their parents.....a way for them to be able to take care of themselves. Money, in and of itself, isn't bad.

But here's the real kicker. Having money.....especially having more than we need.....is sometimes how we come to feel safe and secure. In some respects that's true. We all need some monetary resources to keep the wolf from the door.....to be able to keep a roof over our heads, food on the table and healthcare when we need it. But in many respects, it's a false sense of security. Look at the rich man in the gospel story this morning. He's got a bumper crop.

He's going to kick back and enjoy life. He has enough to rest on his good fortune. He has secured his future!

But guess what? There's not one word from him about gratitude to God for his good fortune. There's not one word from him about sharing his bounty with anyone else. There's not one word from him about his sense of responsibility to those around him. It's all about what he's done and what he has and his sense of his own control over his life. He is, as theologian David Lose says, focused on the unholy trinity of Me, Myself and I. He seems to have no inkling of the presence of God in his life or the sense of real life that is within God.

And here's the point.....he hasn't secured his future at all!

Jesus' message is.....the rich man with the bumper crop isn't safe at all. The rich man with the bumper crop has no control over the length of his life. He's prepared for a future in this life, but he's completely unprepared for his future in the next life. That's why Jesus calls him a fool.....not because he's going to store up the surplus, but because he has completely missed the point. He has stored up no treasure in heaven through an awareness and a devotion to God. His idea of 'abundant life' is completely different from the one that Jesus is talking about.....the one where God is the center of life.....where all things that come to him and to us ultimately come from God.....where giving to others is the greatest sense of connectedness and joy we can experience. And those connections are the treasures in heaven. Those connections in love and relationships are the things that are eternal. He's missed the point altogether. He thinks he has complete control over his life when in fact he has no control over that at all. When things are going well, it's so easy for us to believe that we're in control. We aren't. God is.

There's nothing wrong with money. Actually, there's nothing wrong with having more money than we need. But there may be something wrong with the way we see money and the way we use money. When we build our relationship with God, when we know that all that we are and all that we have ultimately belongs to God, when we are aware that the length of our days is in God's hands alone, then we have gotten the message. When we use what God has given us to strengthen our relationship with God and to strengthen our relationships with others and empower others, then we have used it wisely.

A wise woman, my Mama, used to say, "Don't give until it hurts; give until it feels good."

Give your praise and thanksgiving to God.....until it feels good.

Give your time to others.....until it feels good.

Offer up your prayers to God.....until it feels good.

Listen to God and listen to others.....until it feels good.

Offer encouragement to others.....until it feels good.

Praise and affirm others.....until it feels good.

Stand by someone who needs your support.....until it feels good.

Feed others....in every way.....until it feels good.

Forgive others.....until it feels good.

Give of yourself and your money.....until it feels good.

And remember always, that God has given us the capacity to do all these things.

We are rich indeed.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.