

## **“The Church In Action: Seeing Beyond Ourselves”**

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Luke 12:13-21

### **CHILDREN’S TIME**

I have pictures of two slices of pie, one big one and one little itty bitty one. If you love pumpkin pie, which one would you want? Of course you would want the big one, right?

I have a brother that is just a bit older than I am. When we were little, if there was a piece of pie for us to split, both of us would feel a bit greedy wanting the biggest piece. So, our mom had one of us cut it in two and the other person got to pick which piece they wanted. So, whoever was cutting the pie, was very careful to cut it as evenly as possible or else they knew they would get the smaller piece.

Jesus warned people about getting too greedy. He told a story about a rich man who had a large farm that produced lots of crops. One year he had such a big harvest that he didn’t know what to do with all of the grain. It wouldn’t fit into his barns.

What do you think the man did?

He could have shared some with those who didn't have very much, but he wanted to keep it all to himself. So, he tore down all his barns and built bigger ones so he had enough space to store all of his grain and keep it for himself. That way, he thought, he would have many years’ worth and wouldn’t have to worry about anything.

Jesus told him that keeping everything for himself is greedy and foolish. God is good and has given most of us more than we need. The question is, what will we do with what God has given to us? Will we be greedy and keep it for ourselves, or share it with those who don't have as much?

### **SERMON**

Western society is built on anxiety that comes from an insatiable desire to have lots of stuff. Then, we become dissatisfied with what we have and we go back out to get even better stuff. It is a perpetual cycle.

During the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons we see it especially on the faces of people in stores where they are filling their

carts with all sorts of things that they are suppose to get in order to meet the social expectations of the season.

As we read scripture, we realize that it is not only inside Western Capitalism that we find anxiety about having stuff. For most of human history, there have been the rich who don't worry so much about having enough to live on, but often consider how to amass greater wealth. Then there are the masses of people who live right on the edge of surviving, paycheck to paycheck. If one thing goes wrong (like an illness, or job loss) they might lose their home and livelihood, and perhaps not have enough to eat.

It was to this second group (the poor, not the rich) that Jesus was speaking this parable in Luke. Listen to what it says.

### **READ LUKE 12:13-21**

When I was growing up, my dad owned a window covering business. My mom also worked at various times in different places, but my dad's income was the financial foundation for our family.

When the economy was good, things were great, but when the economy dipped, like it did in the

1980s things got more difficult and my brother and I didn't get a lot of presents for Christmas.

During those years, I remember dreading going to my cousins' house on Christmas Day. I didn't dread it because I didn't want to hang out with my cousins. I loved spending time with them. I didn't want to go to their house on Christmas because I would see all of their big Christmas gifts, like: snowmobiles, motorcycles, or the newest gaming system that we couldn't afford. This left me feeling embarrassed about my new box of crayons and coloring books. Going to their house on Christmas Day created anxiety for me.

This season is even more so filled with anxiety for those who have lived homeless or in poverty their whole lives and have never had the resources to live the cultural ideal during the holidays.

This season creates an even greater disparity than normal between the rich and poor. The gap is more pronounced and the feelings of resentment and anxiety are amplified.

Those who are on the edge of having enough resent those who have more. They wish that they

could win the lotto and not worry about having enough. They long for the windfall that will take away their anxiety and place them higher on the socio-economic ladder. At the heart of this mentality is a spiritual disease called greed.

Jesus pointed this out because greed is counter productive to the kind of society he was working to create. Greed, that desire to have more and more for the self, actually destroys the community that God is building.

Is the holiday season filled with greed? Do we find greed slowly creeping in or forcefully taking over our thoughts as we are heading into Thanksgiving?

With the higher rates of anxiety during the holidays, we may have heard the conventional wisdom that attempted suicide rates go up during this season due to the high levels of stress. However, researchers have found that attempted suicide rates stay constant or actually decrease during the holidays.

Despite the craziness of shopping, spending extra money that people sometimes don't have, living with the social obligation to make extra food and show up at family and

work get togethers, while working long hours and getting less sleep and exercise — even while doing all of that, the attempted suicide rate decreases.

Does anyone know why?

Here is the good news that is important to notice! After looking at all of the research, it seems that human relationships of support and love, which also increases during the holidays, is stronger than all of the greedy pressures leading to anxiety.

In the middle of craziness is the Holy Spirit calling people to act in love and care.

Yes, God has created us in and for community to rely on and share with one another. When we take action to live this out, we find, like the early church, that everyone has enough — that all people are cared for well.

When we live in communities that function the way that God intends, our actions reflect the values of generosity and care that build God's realm in our world.

Rather than being focused on accumulating things for ourselves, in the new community that the Holy

Spirit is creating, people live God's values and create a new reality in the midst of this crazy world.

In the story, a man came to Jesus wanting him to be an arbiter, or judge, to make his brother give him his land inheritance. For this man and so many others, land was seen as essential for financial security and sustainability. Land was handed down in families generation to generation for economic and religious purposes.

Typically the main thing we do with this story is criticize this man for being selfish. Yes, the passage seems to indicate that he is self serving. However, he is actually approaching Jesus on the basis justice, which has been withheld from him.

It must have been that this man's father died without leaving a will. By law, the inheritance goes to the older brother who then divides it among the brothers. The man who came to Jesus must have been the younger brother who is crying out for justice because his older brother is wanting to keep all of the land for himself, not wanting to give the younger brother his share, and this is a hardship for him — it takes away his livelihood!

This man is, like so many others in scripture crying out to God in the middle of injustice. He is a victim at the hand of his older brother, probably due to some personal dispute between them. What has happened is not just. The man knows it and so does Jesus.

This guy wanted to force his brother's hand and get what he is owed by going to an authority like Jesus. His interest clearly is not to resolve the relational issue with his brother, but to force justice. Jesus' response would certainly have been different if he came wanting to address the relationship.

Jesus shifted the conversation. He said that his role wasn't to be judge. He also called the man a fool for approaching life with sole focus on what was due him.

Then Jesus challenged the idea of what is real justice. Justice is to give each one what is due to them, however, as noted Biblical scholar Leslie Newbegin wrote, the problem lies in that we so often over estimate what is due us verses what is due our neighbors.

To make his point, Jesus told a parable about a rich man storing up grain in his barns. The barns and his language of dialoguing with

himself speak to the man's own selfish interest, which he is building. The man was keeping all of the grain for himself in his own barns and for his own private future. He didn't say one thing about sharing with others. At the end of it all he is truly pathetic in how isolated and alone he is with his wealth.

When we start with a demand for justice to have what we deserve and can have for ourselves, we run the risk of perpetuating the same kind of injustice that we say we want to overcome.

In God's world, we begin with generosity on the front end, not after we take for ourselves what we feel is ours and give what is leftover. This is the standard in God's community. This goes back to the ancient Hebrew principle of donating the first fruits of the harvest, or tithing 10% of earnings before buying things for ourselves.

There is nothing inherently evil in material things like land, houses, cars, boats, etc. However, when these things become our first priority over caring for our neighbor, then we participate in injustice.

If the man who approached Jesus wanted to truly help build God's

realm on Earth — be involved in what God was up to in his community — then there needed to be a shift not only in priorities about material things, but in putting the needs of others first.

I'll leave you today with a famous quote from the Nobel Prize winning Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was well attuned to an other-centered community, in much the same spirit as Jesus' vision for a new community in the Gospels. He wrote,

"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."