

August 4, 2019

“Guided by Luke: Relax! Eat, Drink, and Be Merry!” - © Rev. Seth D Jones

Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

In response to a man’s request that Jesus be the judge in a family money problem, Jesus refuses, then he gives a short summary teaching:

“Be on Guard against covetousness, For one’s life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.”

Really, this sermon could end right here, because on the surface, this is self-evident for anyone with a spiritual foundation of their life, regardless of the source of their belief. In fact, I would like to end this sermon right here because the parable is really challenging - especially once we let go of this story being about capitalists, or the rich, or the global profiteers, or the government systems that have become conveyor belts from the middle and lower classes to the super-rich. I want this sermon to be about those things, since it would make today really easy. I could just say, *Covetousness, or greed, has no end once you give into it, and you will never have enough.* But that is not what is being asked of us to understand today.

This man who begins our story and wishes his inheritance to be divided appears to be asking out of greed and wants Jesus to act as the judge in the family dispute. Jesus smartly gets out of that by refocusing the man to what is really important. And then he tells a parable which shows that any spiritual foundation becomes a dangerous and perilous thought when it becomes turned in on itself; or more specifically, when we become turned in on ourselves.

In curvitus se, was Luther’s phrase for it.

Notice in our story today the Rich Fool is completely self-focused. *I will...I don’t...* And then he speaks to himself, to his own soul. He is completely self-focused. All the light of who he is curves back in on himself. When we are curved in on ourselves, even good theology becomes toxic and destructive. The phrase “*eat, drink and be merry*” is straight out of chapter 8 of Ecclesiastes. Eating, drinking, and being merry is the highest honoring of God the Teacher can imagine. When we eat and drink and are merry *among family and friends*, it is of the highest good available to us in this earthly life. But when eating, drinking, and being merry is only about me, when there are no family and friends present, then the teaching becomes good theology used very poorly.

There are all kinds of examples of good theology used badly. The Book of Job is a very long example of at least 4 different theologies that are very good but used really, really badly. Job's three friends, plus the fourth at the end, are all excellent teachers and theologians - they are teachers of good theology. Except none of the theology applies to Job's situation.

Can you think of any theologies that seem pretty good and may even be true, but are applied really poorly?

Some examples:

-- When someone dies, especially tragically, many people like to say, *God has a plan*. God may indeed have a plan, but that way of thinking about God's created order does not, anywhere in Scripture, apply to the death of another. Jesus even affirms the opposite - that death is not a part of God's plan - in the raising of Lazarus.

-- When things are going really badly for another person, we say things like, *What did you do to get into this situation?* or *It was God's will?* It is certainly true that there are many situations where we are the cause of the problem we are now in, and it is also not wrong in any way that aligning with God's will is a good and holy thing. But none of that is really helpful for getting out of the situation until you really know what the situation for the other person really is. In Scripture, following God's will is no guarantee that you aren't in for a really difficult time. In fact, quite the opposite is often true.

-- Another example is applying to individuals things of Scripture that are meant for groups of people. This happens all the time because in English there is no plural for *You*. And so we read, in English, the 10 Commandments as being all about individual behavior, or the Sermon on the Mount as being focused on individuals, or the Fruits of the Spirit as being about what *I need* to pay attention to. Certainly, each of us benefit when we personalize the 10 Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Fruits of the Spirit. This is absolutely part of our calling, but the key to understanding all of those commands and teachings is that they are spoken to groups of people, and the first and primary expectation is that the *community* will uphold these things *for the sake of the individual*.

Part of the problem here is, up until the rise of Christianity, the idea of the individual self was not really a concept anyone held. The individual *I* did not and could not exist separate from the community. *Personal dignity* and *individual rights* are powerful and strong ideas that owe their origins to Christianity, and those ideas are definitely rising to the surface in the Gospels, but no one would have considered such ideas until at least 250AD.

Let's come back to our parable. The curving into the self creates very bad theology, in part because becoming an '*individual*' in the ancient world was the same as '*cutting oneself off from the community*'. No good ever came of such maneuvers. And so, the misapplication of *Eat, drink and be merry* fails to account for the rest of what Ecclesiastes teaches, which says glorifying God is what we are to do in this life before all of us die. Eating, drinking and being merry is done to glorify God because we know death is always before us.

The Rich Fool has not taken into account his community, which Jesus points out will be benefited by the Rich Fool's death anyway. So, on the surface, this is a story about greed, and the problem with the word greed in our culture, is that it applies to the accumulation of things - money, cars, collectibles, computers, a better tablet or phone, mp3s. But greed is also about the means used to get those things. This is why the 10th commandment, on which this story is based -

You shall not covet ^uyour neighbor's house; ^vyou shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's

-is not just about wanting your neighbor's stuff. It is also about organizing your life and the life of the community in such a way that your neighbor must relinquish their stuff to you or not be able to get the stuff you also have. It is about economies - personal and communal.

And that is what makes this parable so difficult and such a personal challenge. Because when we start talking about greed as not only the stuff we want and the stuff we have, but also about how we get that stuff, then we are talking about idolatry. The 10th commandment becomes the 1st commandment -

You shall have no other gods before me.

Greed, covetousness, is the communal and personal test to find out who our true God actually is.

Luther says of the 1st Commandment, that which we hold closest to our heart, that which we gather up into our treasure house, **that** is the god we worship. It is why we need grace, because the most difficult commandment of all is the very first commandment. Most of us hold something closer to our hearts than God. Maybe it is fear, maybe it is success, maybe it is the need for money, maybe it is another person, maybe it is a view of yourself you need to hold up or push down, maybe it is a wrong that was done to you,

maybe, like our man today, it is an inheritance you feel you deserve but have not received.

If we do the deep examination of the soul this parable requires of us- and it is why I find this parable so deeply challenging- we begin to see where we, like the Rich Fool, have curved in upon ourselves. We become like those whom the Psalmist writes about in Psalm 14:

*The ^hfool says in his heart, ⁱ“There is no God.”
They are ⁱcorrupt, they do abominable deeds;
^kthere is none who does good.
The LORD ^llooks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,¹
who ^mseek after God.
They have all turned aside; together they have become ⁿcorrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.*

Last week, I mentioned the ‘*heartbreak of humility*’. This is an amplification of that sensibility. This story presents heartbreaking understanding of ourselves that Jesus is forcing upon us. A part of us, perhaps a very large part of us, dies when we hear these things and see these things about ourselves.

But surrounded by all the mirrors which curve us in ourselves as we die a little under the weight of our self-reflection, it is precisely here that we remember that we die to Christ in our baptism, and are raised up to new life in him. The heartbreak of humility turns into the humble grace of the shimmering, glittering beauty of living this life with each other in this little cathedral which is a humble reminder of the vast chamber that is God’s creation where each of us has been invited to participate, enjoy and thrive.

The Letter to the Colossian church puts it this way:

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For ^fyou have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ ^gwho is your¹ life ^happears, then you also will appear with him ⁱin glory (3:2-5).

This, brothers and sisters in Christ, is what we store within our barns and silos and hearts.

Amen.