

VANITY AND TREASURE

Luke 12:13-21

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

August 4, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 12, verses 13 through 21. It is on page 737 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus confronts one of our favorite false gods. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 12, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." ¹⁶And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" ²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

"All I want is justice!" Perhaps you've heard those words. If you watch Judge Judy, you've probably heard those words a lot. Perhaps you have heard these words from your own mouth.

Justice. Fairness. These things are good. We have laws in our country to protect these things. We have laws to protect our personal property. We even have a law from God. It's called the Seventh Commandment: "Thou shalt not steal." Good Lutherans ask, "What does this mean?" Answer: "We should fear and love God so that we do not rob our neighbor of his money or property, nor bring them into our possession by unfair dealing or fraud, but help him to improve and protect his property and living."

Personal property is good. It is given by God, and God commands the protection of it. God has even ordained government to ensure justice, to make sure we get what we deserve, and to make sure we don't hurt our neighbors by taking what is theirs. Personal property is good, and money is good, but it makes a really terrible God. Instead of trusting in the gifts you have received, trust in the one who gives the gifts, because he gives more than possessions; he gives forgiveness, life, and salvation through Jesus Christ. He gives eternal riches.

In this Gospel lesson Jesus is presented with a dispute between two brothers. One brother comes to Jesus and says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." This brother wanted justice. He wanted what he believed was rightfully his. He wanted Jesus to tell his brother to share the inheritance with him.

Having a sibling means sharing. I remember a brother and a sister who fought over an umbrella. You've probably observed something similar. The boy had the umbrella, and he was

having some innocent fun with it. The sister never would have wanted the umbrella; it wasn't even raining. But she saw her brother enjoying it, and you probably know where this is going. She wanted to have his fun. First she asked politely. "Can I see that umbrella?" The boy said, "No." Then she got impolite. "But dad and mom said we're supposed to share. That means you have to give it to me right now." Apparently to a child sharing means, "You have to give me your stuff when I want it."

Adults really aren't that different. The only difference is that we have learned to hide our greed. We still want things that belong to other people. We notice when our neighbor gets a new car. We notice when our brother builds an addition onto his house. We notice when another church in town builds a bigger building. We want the things that belong to other people.

The man in the Gospel lesson just wanted his share of the inheritance. The text doesn't say whether he was right or wrong. It doesn't say why his brother hadn't shared the inheritance. We don't know if he had a good reason or not. All we know is that the man thought he was being treated unfairly. He seems to know that Jesus is a good teacher. Jesus taught the Law correctly. Since the man assumed he was right in the inheritance controversy; he also assumed that Jesus—the good teacher—would agree with him. He wanted to use the Law against his brother. But the Law does not tell you how your neighbor should treat you; it tells you how you should treat your neighbor. The man expected Jesus to be on his side. But Jesus was not on his side, at least not in the way he hoped.

How often do we do the same thing? In our minds we create God in our own image. We believe that our convictions are right. And of course we do; if we didn't think so, we wouldn't believe them. We believe that our values are the best values, and so we conclude that God must have the same values. We like to believe that we are good, and we believe that God is good, and so we conclude that God must be a lot like us. We try to have God on our own terms. But we have it all backward. The only way to know God, the only way to know what he is really like, the only way to know what he values, is through the Scriptures. God makes himself known on his own terms. Instead of imposing our values on God, we must learn and accept his values as our own.

The man in the Gospel lesson wanted to have Jesus on his own terms. He wanted Jesus to be a lawgiver, and he wanted Jesus to give the Law to his brother.

We have a nagging temptation to do this with the Law. We hear God's commandments, and we think of all the other people who should hear it. But we don't apply it to ourselves. Sometimes after a sermon where I really come down on some specific sin, especially the ones that define our culture, someone will say to me, "Good sermon. There are a lot of people who needed to hear that." That's when I know I've missed the mark. A lot of other people needed to hear that. No. The Law is not for all those other people. The Law is for you. The Law is for me. If the Law is not for you, then the Gospel's not for you either.

This was one of the problems with the man who came to Jesus asking for justice. He valued fairness and justice. He valued getting what he deserved, and he didn't see his greed as a problem as long as he had a right to everything he got. But Jesus doesn't seem to care who was right or wrong. Jesus looked beyond the man's request. He looked beyond what the man thought his problem was, and Jesus saw his real problem. The real problem was his greed, and to fix this problem, the man did not need an arbitrator; he needed a mediator. The man did not need someone to settle his dispute with his brother. He did not need someone to tell his brother to pay up. The real problem was with his soul. It was a problem with his relationship to God. He needed

someone to atone for his sin. Jesus was not the judge the man wanted. Jesus is the mediator the man needed.

Jesus did not come to be a judge or arbitrator between men; Jesus came to be a mediator between God and man. He did not come to settle disputes. He did not come to say, “You’re right, and you’re wrong.” He did not come to pat the righteous on the back and make sure they get what they deserve. Jesus did not come to settle disputes between right and wrong, because we are all wrong! Jesus did not come to make sure we get what we deserve, because what we deserve is death.

So Jesus did not come to settle the relationship between two brothers. Certainly, in many cases he does bring reconciliation, and this is good. But in other cases he brings division (12:51-53). Jesus did not come to settle the relationship between brothers; he came to repair the relationship between God and man. Jesus did not come to force people to pay what they owe; he came to pay what we owe to God, but cannot pay. And so he is our mediator. That is, he is the one who stands in our place. He is the one who bore our punishment to give us peace with God. He is the one who stands between God and us.

Atonement was what the man really needed, and so Jesus pointed out this man’s problem by telling a parable. In this parable a man who is already rich becomes even richer. His land produces a crop so large that his barns can’t hold it. He is literally too rich for his own good. He has nowhere to put all his stuff. He sounds like an American. How many of us have more stuff than we know what to do with?

I had to move four times because of seminary. That was over four years ago. And I still have things I haven’t used since before the first of those moves. That was seven years ago. All I’ve done with the stuff is move it, move it again, and again, and again, and I put it on a shelf in the basement, where it’s sat for four years. My life would actually be better if these things did not exist. But they do exist, so I have the problem of what to do with them.

That’s the problem this man has with his crops. He wanted to keep it all, so he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. Think about this. The man was already rich, and now he becomes even richer. He wants to keep all of his extra wealth, so he spends part of it to build a place to store the rest of it. It’s actually kind of wasteful. His old barns were already big enough to store more than he needed, but he can’t let it go. It’s ironic. He spends part of his extra wealth just so he can keep the other part of his extra wealth.

The man is greedy and selfish. Count the number of times the man uses words “I” or “my” as he talks to himself. I counted six “I”s and five “my”s. I, I, I, I, I, I. My, my, my, my, my. The guy is all alone with his stuff. He has no one else to talk to, so he talks to his own soul. It’s kind of funny, but it’s also terribly sad. The only time he uses the word “you” is when he’s talking to himself. The sad irony is that he ends up alone. God required his soul from him, but even if God hadn’t, the man could only say to his own soul, “Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” His selfishness had sentenced him to enjoy his possessions alone.

But he didn’t even get to do that. What good were his riches to him? On the day when God called for his soul, they were of no benefit. His riches were not bad. His obsession with his riches was bad. Money is good, but it makes a really terrible God. If you want money to be your god, it will work about as well as anything ... until it doesn’t. And there always comes a moment when it doesn’t work anymore. That moment may be at death, or it may come earlier, but it certainly won’t come later than death.

VANITY AND TREASURE (Luke 12:13-21)

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon calls this “vanity.”

“Vanity of vanities!

All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2).

He laments that he spent so much effort toiling, only to leave his wealth and his kingdom to someone who did not toil for it. In Solomon’s case, he had to leave it all to a foolish son named Rehoboam, who lost most of it.

It is better “for a person [to] eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.” This is a gift from God (Eccl. 2:24).

Money and possessions are not bad. They are gifts from God. “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Tim. 6:10). But money itself is good. Even wealth is good. We use it to build houses to protect our families from the bitter cold. We use it to feed ourselves. We use it to build places of worship. We use it to spread the Gospel to Sierra Leone, India, Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, and the farthest corners of the globe. We even use it simply for our enjoyment. And this is also good. Every good thing is a gift from God, and God desires for us to use them wisely. If we enjoy our possessions and use them for good purposes, this is good. But if our focus is on accumulating them, this is vanity. We will accumulate, and accumulate, and accumulate, and die. The end. And if wealth has fully taken the place of the one True God, death will be far worse than we imagined.

Like so many other sins, the sin does not lie in the gift, but in the abuse of the gift. The sin lies in valuing the gift more than the giver. The problem with the sin of greed is not money; the problem is us.

It is a destructive sin. In the parable the rich man stored up wealth for himself, and he thought this would bring peace to his soul. But God calls him a “fool.” He says, “**This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?**” (12:20). Jesus adds one comment at the end of the parable: “**So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God**” (12:21).

The person who stores up any kind of earthly treasure, while neglecting God, is a fool. The treasure may be material possessions. For many of us it probably is. Or it may be popularity, notoriety, health, intelligence, etc., but it is all fleeting. At the end, when we lose our battle to cancer, or we don’t see that car in our blind spot, everything we worked for and stored up will be gone. The only thing that will matter is if we are rich toward God.

So what does that mean? How do I become rich toward God? Do I become rich toward God by giving my money to the poor or supporting missions? Do I become rich toward God by teaching Sunday School or serving on the church council? Do I become rich toward God by doing the right things and avoiding the bad things? No, no, and no. We become rich toward God through the atoning death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We become rich toward God through our mediator.

The man in the Gospel lesson—the one who asked Jesus to tell his brother to share the inheritance—this man wanted Jesus to be his judge or arbitrator. What he really needed was for Jesus to be his mediator. This, ultimately, was what Jesus was for the man, but, sadly, he did not recognize it. We need the same thing. We need Jesus to be our mediator. And this, thankfully, is what Jesus is for us.

We do not need Jesus to tell other people to pay us what they owe. We need Jesus to pay God what we owe and cannot pay. We do not need Jesus to secure our riches on earth. We need Jesus to secure our riches in heaven. We can work for riches on earth, and we may or may not get them. But we cannot work for riches in heaven, and so we have Jesus, our advocate before the

VANITY AND TREASURE (Luke 12:13-21)

Father, our mediator, our substitute. Jesus did pay what we owe. And he has secured our riches in heaven. These are the terms on which God deals with us.

Like the man in the Gospel lesson, we can try to have God on our own terms, but it will not work. We can only have God on his terms, and this is better, because when we deal with God on his terms, we deal with him according to his grace. You could ask God for fairness. You could ask for justice. You could ask him to give you what you deserve. I suggest you don't. I don't think you would like it, because "we sin daily and deserve nothing but punishment." It is better to take God on his terms. It is better to have Jesus. Instead of fairness, ask for grace. Instead of justice, ask for mercy. Instead of what you deserve, ask for what Jesus Christ has earned. God gives you his grace, his mercy, and the riches of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has accomplished your salvation. He has secured for you riches toward God. He has made peace with your Heavenly Father through his precious blood. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.