

Love + Fear
Luke 12.13-21
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Pentecost +11C
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He doesn't sound like a fool, at least not to our modern ears, and yet most of our Bibles label today's story as that of a rich fool. He's doing what responsible do—paying for his immediate needs and diversifying the rest of his savings in a range of interest bearing accounts. Rainy days are covered, retirement is covered. He's a successful business person, by our present day standards. But something is awry. Something is missing in this man's life, and we're supposed to hear it easily as Jesus tells this story.

Two men come to Jesus, arguing over the family estate, and Jesus is disgusted that they misunderstand his mission so severely. He's not interested in the money and the stuff or which of them will get what; he's interested in the story and the intent behind their struggle. And so he warns the listening audience to "be on your guard" because life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions. Then he tells the story of this man, the fool, who reasonably sorts and saves his financial investments.

The man is talking to himself, his harvest so plentiful that he doesn't have space to store it all. He says to himself: what should I DO

I have no place

I will do this

I will pull down old barns to make bigger barns

I will store MY grain and MY goods

I will say to MY soul

Because we are the nation of storage units and garages in which we can no longer park our cars because they are piled high with stuff, we don't quite hear the problem with this man's internal conversation. In a long scriptural tradition of famine and God's miraculous provision, of mandates for farmers to leave extra harvest for the poor, of the requirement to bring the first of the harvest to the temple that we might remember all of this life is gift, this man shows disregard for all of that. Maybe he's forgotten. Maybe he's a man who never knew in the first place that he was called to love his neighbor and remember the orphan, widow, and poor in his midst. He is turned in on himself and asking only what should I do with all of this extra extra that I have? Not only does he strategize about how he'll store it all, he talks himself down from worrying about his overly plentiful harvest. He tells himself he can relax as soon as its all stored away. Then

he can finally sit down and have a drink. Then he won't have to be so worried about his life. As soon as the grains and goods are sorted and stored, then he can finally catch his breath and live. "You fool," says God, "today is the only day you have, and you have squandered it."

Therefore, Jesus continues, do not worry about your life. The man's efforts at life may appear responsible and well-reasoned to us, but they are rooted in a hyper-focus on himself and a foundational belief that his life is his own, a nagging fear that he must protect himself against future lack somewhere down the road. One day, after the work is all done, he'll finally be able to rest awhile and delight in his life.

Jesus instructs: Fear separates us from God's hopes for us

Fear separates us from God's kingdom plans

Fear separates us from who we truly are at our best and fullest

Fear separates us from one another and divides us into "I-s" instead of "We-s"

When we are lost to our true selves, we say to ourselves, "This is thing that I want. This is the thing that benefits me." Jesus says, "That thinking is about anxiety. Fear. Self-preservation. Wrong thinking. Not kingdom thinking. This life is not about 'I' and 'my' and 'mine' at all. This life, this gift of life, this God-breathed, Spirit-filled life is about 'we' and 'us' and 'our' coming together as the very kingdom of God. There's no fear here. There's no anxiety here. If you are afraid, you are clinging to something that isn't God. Maybe it's your possessions or your money, maybe it's your assumptions about what keeps you safe or what makes you better than other people. Look at your hands. Are they open and waiting to receive and welcome and embrace? Are they gripped tightly and holding onto something?"¹

Scott Bader-Saye, in his book *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, explains it this way: "By imagining some future evil, fear draws us in on ourselves so we 'extend' ourselves to 'fewer things.' This, in turn, becomes a hindrance to Christian discipleship, which calls us not to contract but to expand, not to limit ourselves to a few things but to open ourselves charitably and generously to many things, not to attack that which threatens us but to love even the enemy."²

Is your life becoming bigger or smaller? Is your heart expanding or hardening? Are you living with more hope and gratitude and compassion or more fear and anger and teeth gnashing? Jesus says these are clues to whether we're on the right path or wrong. We

¹ I failed to footnote this but do not think these are my own words.

² <http://www.aplainaccount.org/#!Luke-121321/bhul0/57960b7c0cf2779eabf6b424>

wander on and off all of the time, so know you are not alone when anxiety wins the day. This is not to say that anxiety, particularly a genuine anxiety disorder, should merely be prayed away. This is to say that when we spot warning signs that we are not living in the fullness of who God has created to be because we are shrinking in fear, we help each other get back to that fullness with whatever tools and resources are available to us. We need each other to live this out.

We wander off as a congregation sometimes, too. When our vision becomes smaller and our fear becomes greater, that is a sign that we are not living into the abundant shalom of God. When we are afraid that God cannot fund the same dreams that God has given us, then we are not flourishing. When we move in fear, we are not making space for others to join us and flourish. We are not trusting that God is at work in ways we might never fully understand. We are not glimpsing the Holy Spirit dancing and breathing around us. We are missing out on life.

Fred Craddock says we might need to reverse Jesus' last words to "where the possessions are, there the heart will be." What you are gripping and terrified to release is where your heart really is. Is it possible today that we are desperately in need of Jesus' liberation that our hands might become open to one another?

If so, Craddock reminds us, "Birds and flowers can be our teachers when it comes to depending on God. Those who put kingdom matters first will not only have their needs met but will have the kingdom as well. Seek God's kingdom, yes, but do not add the kingdom to the list of things about which to be anxious. That is counterproductive and an exercise in unbelief. Rather, seek the kingdom in the firm belief that it is God's desire to give it to you."³

There is a lot of fear in our world right now—fear of terrorism, fear of running out of money and water and food, fear of who will lead, fear of what the next chapter in the church's story is, fear of our own private burdens, fear of making the wrong next choice. I don't know what's next for any of us—for our church or THE church, for our nation seeking unity in the midst of a contentious presidential race, for neighbors who don't look exactly like one another. And yet, showing up again and again here with you gives me tremendous hope for the lot of us. Whether it's Sunday morning worship or a Tuesday night of Cuban music, we could be anywhere else. We don't have to keep putting in the effort to share our lives with one another. We don't have to share our resources, listen or make space for all voices to be heard. We could simply take care of ourselves, choose an easier path, and surround ourselves with only the most absolutely

³ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, pp. 163-164

like-minded folks. And yet, here we are. This is the real life we have been after all along. This is good.

We have many challenges before us. Is that a tremendous understatement? It seems every choice before us is dripping with potential for change, for disaster, for unity, or for irreparable division. As U.S. political leaders across the aisle have reminded us in recent days, we have choices in how we move forward and in how we see the world around us. This is true in the Church, too. Who we choose to be informs how we will live and move and have our being in this world. After all, we are people commanded to be known by the way we love one another. If that is our starting point in all things, our hearts will expand and our lives will get bigger. We will see the good and hope and promise in the challenges before us.

Today, I am so grateful I do not face these challenges alone. I am amazed by my bold, smart, prophetic, compassionate friends and colleagues in the Church. What a rich community! What a beautifully, broad swath of people to plot and laugh and dance and play and lament and march alongside! When I step off of the path and begin to spin in fear, you guide me back onto the Way. I will do the same for you and remind you, too. We will keep finding our way back to the heart of God, together. There is so much goodness, so much Spirit, so much hope pulsing through these transformational challenges and holy moments.

Whatever comes next for my life or yours, for our church, for our neighbors, for our nation, we mustn't be afraid. We mustn't move in fear. We must look for what is good, true, just, pure, excellent, and worthy of praise. We must gather in gratitude and love and keep on doing these things knowing whatever comes next, the peace of God will be with us. The kingdom of God is opening before us when we live together in these generous, open-hearted ways. This is our hope.⁴

⁴ Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott, *Baptist News Global: Looking for What is Good*
<https://baptistnews.com/article/looking-for-what-is-good-in-a-challenging-world/>