

Watch Out for the Piddling Stuff!
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August 5, 2007
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Luke 12.13-21 (NRSV)

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Are we rich toward God?

On a warm August Sunday, you probably don’t want to hear about greed and I don’t much want to talk about it. But Jesus asks us an important question that we should not ignore. The parable described a rich man who was a fool because he was rich in things but not rich toward God. Are we foolish? Let’s think about that.

So often this question gets asked in moralistic terms: are we right with God? Are we obedient to God? Are we ethically upright and morally pure? But I don’t think moralizing is the best approach. When we moralize about scripture, we tend to point fingers, at least in our minds. We look at others and justify ourselves thinking we’re not as bad as they are. But this misses the point. We need to quit worrying about other people’s barns — to use our text’s images — and what they do or don’t do to make themselves feel secure. We should inventory our own barns, the things we possess, and ask seriously, do they possess us? Are we rich in things or are we rich toward God?

The problem is that we *are* — we’ve just got to admit this — *very* rich in possessions. An example: thirty years ago, many homes had but one television and at most two radios. Today more and more homes have a TV and a radio in every room. And if it isn’t TVs and radios, it’s something else. The reality of American life is that we are *in our very being* consumers. Now I’m not condemning consumption for condemnation’s sake. The economy upon which we all depend depends on consuming. But the consuming consumes us.

A decade ago, a popular simplicity guru named Elaine St. James, wrote a bestselling book called *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter*. She wrote, “Possessions are nine-tenths of the problem.”¹ The current simplicity expert is a man named Peter Walsh who is a professional organizer on The Learning Channel’s “Clean Sweep” series. His book came out a couple of months ago. It’s called *It’s All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life*

¹ Elaine St. James, *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter* (New York: Hyperion, 1994) 23.

with Less Stuff. Walsh states emphatically: our stuff *controls* us.²

What interests me is that St. James and Walsh are not even writing from a religious point of view but they make much the same point as Jesus did: one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. We've got to get our possessions out of the way if we want to be rich toward God.

I recently read a book by Eugene Peterson, a well-known Presbyterian pastor, author, and teacher. He tells how when he was five years old, living in eastern Montana, he would walk across a meadow to the barbed wire fence of a nearby farm and watch a farmer named Leonard Storm plow his field. The thing Peterson wanted most of all was to get a ride on that huge John Deere tractor.

So one day he was standing at the fence watching Leonard Storm plow his field. The farmer was probably a hundred yards away when he spotted little Eugene. He stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat, and made strong waving motions to the boy with his arms. Peterson said he had never seen anyone use gestures like that. To him, the farmer looked mean and angry; he was large and ominous in his bib overalls and straw hat. He was yelling at the boy, but the wind was blowing against him, so the youngster heard nothing. He figured he was probably where he shouldn't be — five-year-old boys often are. So he turned and left, feeling rejected and rebuked.

Leonard and Olga Storm were huge, forbidding Norwegians. They never smiled. Peterson said they exuded a kind of thick, Nordic gloom. They were always in church on Sundays, always sitting in the back row with their son. They were also rich, at least rich by the standards of that community and congregation. Whenever there was an emergency need for money in the church, the pastor would do the fund raising on the spot from the pulpit: we need \$2,000; how many will give \$20, how many \$50, how many \$10? People would raise their hands. The pastor kept a running total on a pad of paper. When the prayers and askings stopped producing money and they were still far short of the goal, Leonard Storm would rise ponderously and say, "I'll make up the difference." The "difference" was always several hundred dollars. Eugene was always impressed.

The Sunday after he had run away from farmer Storm in the field, the giant farmer called the boy over after worship and said, "Little Pete" (a term Eugene always hated), why didn't you come out in the field Thursday and ride the tractor with me?"

Peterson told him that he didn't know he could have, that he thought Storm was chasing him away. The farmer said, "I called you to come. I waved for you to come. Why did you leave?"

The boy said he didn't know what the farmer meant. Storm said, "What do you do when you want to get somebody to come to you?" The little boy showed him, extending his index finger and curling it back toward himself three or four times.

The farmer harrumphed, "That's piddling, Little Pete. On the farm we do things big. That's piddling."³

Peterson tells how he felt crushed by that. He felt small. He was already small on the outside; now he felt small on the inside. He was disappointed, crushed, also a little angry. Farmer Storm called him and his world piddling.

But he remembered it and Eugene Peterson came to see that his encounter with Leonard

² Peter Walsh, *It's All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff* (New York: Free Press, 2007) 26.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 158-160.

Storm was a parable of our lives before God. God is gigantic and large and generous beyond our imagining and so often we deal with God in piddling terms. We are rich in things but not rich in God — in the largeness of God's love.

In the book Peterson told the story to make this powerful point (and he especially aims at preachers): "We stand in our pulpits and lecterns and extend an index finger to suggest that people tidy up their morality or embellish their piety or get the facts straight. And God is waving his windmill Jesus arms, calling all of us to grace and mercy and salvation."⁴

Conclusion

Being rich in God means we need to quit dealing in piddling stuff, whether that is our *possessions*, our *religious habits*, our *ways of thinking*, or whatever. To be rich in God is to get other stuff out of the way so we can enter into and enjoy the enormous life-giving presence of God.

A few days after Eugene's disappointment, he was back at the fence, watching, waiting, hoping he might get a second chance. The giant Norwegian saw him, stopped the tractor, and did it again, made that sweeping motion of invitation. This time the little boy was through the barbed wire in a flash, running across the furrowed field. The farmer pulled him up on the big green John Deere. He let the boy stand in front of him, holding the steering wheel, pulling the plow down that long stretch of field, his smallness now absorbed into Brother Storm's largeness.⁵

Do you want to be richer in God and not consumed by the piddling stuff? I do. So let's begin. And if we've begun before and stopped, let's pick it up and begin again. Change is slow and always hard. But let's begin.

Maybe it does take clearing out clutter in our homes or offices. Maybe there is clutter in our relationships or priorities that need to be simplified and realigned. But whatever it is, let's rid ourselves of the piddling stuff that keeps us from God's abundant love. Remember the occasion of Jesus telling the parable. A man wanted his brother to divide up the family inheritance. In other words, he wanted his share of the family wealth in order to be secure. Don't we all want that?

But Jesus refused to play that game. Instead he said, "Take care! Be on your guard against *all kinds* of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Our lives are best when they are taken up in the largeness of God's love. So let's be on guard against any kind of piddling stuff that gets in the way.

⁴ Peterson, 161.

⁵ Peterson, 197.