

Jeremiah 17: 5-11
I Timothy 6: 6-10
Luke 12: 13-21

Investment and Contentment
July 31, 2016
Mary R. Brownlow

“I don’t care too much for money, money can’t buy me love.” Sound familiar? Those of us who were alive in the early 60’s remember those words. Last week, I started with Mick Jagger’s lyrics; this week it’s the Beatles. I really seem to be tapping into some deep memories when I read the Bible and the teachings of Jesus about money.

Now that I’ve broken the ice, I can tell you how preachers often feel reticent or reluctant to preach about money or economics or greed. They are afraid of seeming judgmental, or worse, self-serving, since their salaries depend on the generosity of those in the pews. When readings about rich fools turn up in the rotation of lectionary passages, preachers can get a bit nervous. Should we “spiritualize” the story, so that it’s not *really* about being rich with a large bank account? Or should we temporize, with a lot of information about first century land ownership and investment? Those are my temptations. So I am going to resist temptation, because I suspect we are really hoping for, and longing for, something more substantial and challenging to wrestle with today. At least, that’s my hope.

People have been longing for the truth to be named for millennia: we heard it in the 2600-year-old words of Jeremiah. “The heart is devious above all else...who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart....” We heard it the 1900-year-old letter to Timothy, which contrasts contentment and greed. Many of us have a complicated relationship with money and possessions. On some level, we know that there is an inner conflict happening in the human heart, as we search for love and contentment and pleasure and meaning, but get distracted by anxiety and greed. Many of us imagine that, if only we had enough money, that anxiety and greed would melt away. We’d like to imagine this, but life does not usually play out that way.

Every once in a while, we remember that having huge financial resources is not all it’s cracked up to be. Here are a few statistics:

- One out of three lottery winners go bankrupt within the first three years. So much for instant security.
- According to Sports Illustrated, 78 percent of National Football League players and an estimated 60 percent of National Basketball Association players go bankrupt or are under severe financial stress in just two years and five years, respectively, after their retirements. So much for fabulous wealth.
- The former First Lady of the Philippines, Imelda Marcos, famously had over a thousand pairs of shoes. Her wardrobe also included 15 mink coats, 65 parasols, 71 pairs of sunglasses, 508 gowns, and 888 handbags. Talk about a need for more barns and storage

space! I believe that a lot of those items are now in a museum, which is a kind of barn, come to think of it.

Back in the 400's, Saint Augustine wrote: "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them." I might amend that so say that our hearts and minds are not tuned to receive them.

Today we heard about what happened while Jesus was preaching to a crowd about the Holy Spirit. He is interrupted by someone in the crowd who has another concern: not theological, but material. Seeing that Jesus has an air of authority about him, he calls out, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." A bit of a non-sequitur, perhaps, from the Holy Spirit. Notice: it is not, "Teacher, what should my family do about sharing our wealth," but "Tell my brother..." The fact is, there was plenty of law and precedent in the Hebrew Scriptures for settling this inheritance dispute. Hence Jesus' reproof: "Friend, who set me up as the judge or divider up of property for you?" He does not want to divide up the property: he wants to talk about the deviations of the human heart, about investment and contentment. So he warns the man in the crowd to be on his guard against all kinds of greed, and tells his listeners a parable. He is deflecting, as if to say, "The issue here is not whether you get your fair share, but whether wanting it so much will destroy you."

It is a curious parable, as much for what is *not* said as for what is. It begins with an inanimate actor: the land. It does *not* say, a rich man grew a lot of crops. It says that the land produced a surplus. This surplus starts a conversation, but *not* amongst the rich man and his family, or his workers, or his neighbors. He talks to himself, and his first question is not about gratitude or rejoicing. It's about worry, his own personal worry: "What should I do, for I have no place to store it all." But, luckily his self has an answer: "I'll tear down my old barns and build bigger ones, so that I can fit *everything* in." By the way, I counted, and he uses "I" eleven times in a few verses. We notice the frequency of the possessive pronoun in his thoughts -- my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, and my soul.

The lively internal conversation continues: "And I am going to say to my soul (or psyche or life force), 'Soul, you can relax. Those big barns have solved my (or "our") problem. We (or I) have enough.'" I guess he's going to eat, drink and be merry all alone, by himself, with his soul.

As if this whole "me, myself, and I" conversation is just too much, just too much deviousness of the heart, God breaks in and jolts him out of his reverie with a name and a question. This is unique in Jesus' parables -- God actually speaking in a parable -- so God must really have been provoked. "Fool!" he says. This is the moment of reckoning. Your soul (or psyche or life force) is being demanded of you. Who will own those barns of stuff then?

Jesus was very interested in the interface between material possessions and the moral life. In this parable he juxtaposes two difficult topics, then: material possessions and mortality. (Now, by the way, a preacher gets really nervous. Money *and* mortality? These are topics that really antagonize a congregation.) For Jesus, though, this is a matter of emphasis. Everything is at stake here: your heart (devious or not), your soul (talkative or not), your relationship with your families, your neighbors, your relationship with God, your loves, your fears and your legacy.

Jesus uses a curious phrase in the final contrast about the rich fool's comeuppance: those who store up treasures for themselves but are not "rich toward God." What could it mean to be "rich toward God?" I am pretty sure that Jesus did not have church finances in mind here, or building enormous cathedrals or paying for amazing worship services. I think that this richness toward God begins with trust, as Jeremiah says, like the tree planted by the water. Trust is the opposite of anxiety. Trust and greed are not compatible states of mind. The letter to Timothy calls it "godliness combined with contentment." We begin with that, that investment of trust, and then we begin to "bear fruit."

So, how can we begin to apply this to our own lives, here and now? Having heard the parable, we do not necessarily expect to have our souls demanded of us "this very night." But the parable itself tells us that our true life is can be revealed to us, every day, if we reflect on the end of all our striving. Have you ever imagined the words that will be spoken at your own memorial service? This, I think, is what the parable is getting at. We want to hear a eulogy, not a resume. We want to know someone's heart, not their net assets. We want to be inspired by their legacy, not to be made jealous of their possessions, or depressed by the way their lives narrowed down to a focus on earning and accomplishment. We want to hear about the contentment that came when they invested in the common good, not the anxiety they expressed at needing one more barn.

I am sure that you have all heard the story of Alfred Nobel, who made a huge fortune in the 19th century as the inventor of dynamite. At the age of 55 Nobel pick up a newspaper and read his own obituary there. Of course, it was a mistake: one of his brothers had died and a journalist had confused the two men. Nobel read a description of his life, how he was perceived as a merchant of death: one who made money out of war and destruction. He got a preview of his eulogy, and he didn't like it – he was shocked, in fact. At that point, Nobel decided to change the way he would be remembered. He altered his will so that his fortune – all that surplus stored in his enormous "barns" would find a new purpose. His legacy would be the recognition of great creative and intellectual achievements – and a special award going to one who had done the most for world peace. Some people today know that Nobel invented dynamite, but everyone knows that his fortune draws our attention to great peacemakers each year.

The philosopher Sophocles said: "One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been." This is a beautiful way to imagine looking at a complete and rich life at its end. But, I want to argue, maybe we do not need to wait until the evening, maybe some splendor is available to us now. As Christians we can start investing right away in the blessed life, the glory of the Kingdom. We can risk the investment of living into our faith, spending freely our resources of forgiveness, hospitality, generosity, kindness, spending them today. We can incorporate that kind of investment into our daily lives: our work, our play, our community, our learning, our friendships. We can cultivate habits which dispel the fear of our souls be demanded of us at any time. What an investment, and what a payoff!

I return to Jesus' words to the man who wanted a favorable judgment on dividing up the family inheritance. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," he said. This is healing advice, a soul doctor's advice. Loving possessions too much is bad for the heart. It is bad for relationships. The Timothy reading goes so far as to say that loving money too much is the root of all evil. It distracts us from lives of purpose and fulfillment. And the Beatles were right: money can't buy you love. It does not fill up the well of need and loneliness that humans carry around inside.

Do you know what can fill up that deep well? It's things we all own already, hearts full and barns full: forgiveness, hospitality, generosity, kindness. We spend those resources, because we are healed in that process. We are made more content in that process. We unkink the devious ways of the greedy heart. We are the richer for it. And, as we do so, we find that we clutch less tightly the surplus of the land, the surplus in the bank accounts, and the material riches that can be shared with our brothers and sisters.

I think that this is an experiment worth trying: to start, as Jesus did, with a generosity of spirit. To start with words of forgiveness and kindness. To find out who is hungry, and do something about it. To find out who is excluded, and welcome them in. And then, to see what happens. Will our own hearts begin to heal? Will our own hands clutch a little less tightly the abundance of possessions? Will we find the idea of our own mortality less fearful, knowing that we have already received the "splendor of the day" in the fullness of our relationships?

So join we me on this experiment, this adventure. I want to release anxiety and greed. I want my hands to be so empty that they can receive all those good things that God is trying to give. Amen.