

What Abundance Looks Like

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

July 31, 2022

Luke 12:13-21

Oftentimes, religion is accused of living in the esoteric clouds, of having no relationship to real life. And I get that. I can get in the theological weeds of double predestination, transubstantiation vs. consubstantiation, substitutionary atonement with the best of them. But I blame theologians, not theology. The best theology engages matters of human importance – meaning of life, ethical decisions, living in the world. Real life stuff.

We just heard a prime example. Jesus is speaking to a crowd, teaching them, using parables from their real-life settings. And someone shouts out to him, kind of like a reporter yelling out a question at a press conference. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Talk about real life. This voice from the crowd is asking Jesus to settle a financial dispute between siblings. Talk about real life – money and families.

I can’t help but think of two shows I’ve been watching recently. I can’t really recommend them, at least not from this “sanctified” location, because they are NSFC – not safe for church. “Succession” and “The Mighty Gemstones” capture the toxic formula of greed and family dysfunction in quite extraordinary and often entertaining ways. “Succession” imagines the Roy family (“Roy” for king, I suppose), a family whose head, Logan, has made billions in media, a kind of parody of the Murdoch family. There is one child from a first marriage – Connor, three from a second – Kendall, Roman, and a daughter, Siobhan, nicknamed, appropriately, “Shiv.” It’s like a very glossy soap opera, with the children contending with one another, plotting against their father, oftentimes ineptly, a combo platter of seriousness and farce. They contend for their father’s attention, if not affection, even as they plot against him, and it’s difficult to tease out what they seek more – his approval or his fortune.

“The Mighty Gemstones” hits a little closer to home. It is more obviously a comic farce, the story of a highly successful TV evangelist, Eli Gemstone, and his three comically incompetent children – Jesse, Kelvin and Judy. Eli is widowed, and aging, and each of the children seek to take over the empire. The children vie and plot, against one another, against their father, each having an extremely overdeveloped sense of self-confidence, when a little reality check would indicate a different reality. They love the lavish lifestyle their father has provided for them, and want to be at the head of the empire when it passes to a new generation. Like “Succession,”

the deeper questions are less about money – though they are about that – but power, and approval, from their father and the world.

Watching these shows in some proximity will make you shake your head. I have seen them compared, and rightly so. But they are different in at least one way, as far as I can tell. It's not clear that Logan Roy loves his children. It's clear that Eli Gemstone does.

As I said, I can't really recommend it from *here*, but if you do find your way into the world of the Roys or the Gemstones, you *might* be entertained, you *will* be horrified, and you might ponder a bit.

Most of us won't have massive empires – media or religious – to contend with. Nor will we enjoy the obscenely large amounts of money that define these made-up worlds.

But money wreaking havoc and causing anxiety is not made up.

Family dynamics gone awry are not made up.

Issues of power – even on a much smaller scale – are not made up.

The quest for approval – whether from a detached father figure or a boss or even your own self – is never far off.

And so when this unidentified voice shouts out to Jesus – “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance” – we can immediately relate. This is real life.

Jesus is smart. He often is. He will not be manipulated; he will not wade into this domestic quagmire. “Who made me the judge of this dispute?” he asks, or more accurately, declares. I won't touch this third rail of family dispute.

Jesus is smart. But he is also wise. He goes on to tell this person be to on guard, to be careful, mindful, in what is most certainly a minefield of potential conflict and family hardship. “Take care,” he says. Take care. Be on your guard, he says, against all kinds of greed – all kinds of greed, which I read as meaning financial greed, and also greed for power, for approval, for influence. Watch out for greed, all kinds, he says, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

If you were asked to summarize the gospel, you could do a lot worse than those 10 words: “one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Abundance, yes. But not abundance of possessions.

Jesus then tells a story to make his point, as he so often does when asked to answer a question. A rich man owned land that produced in abundance. Right about now I like to think of that land

producing very delicious sweet corn, though that's not a likely Middle East scenario. Abundance. He had so much, so much, that he had no place to store everything. His plan was to tear down his current storage structures and build larger ones. On one level, that seems prudent. A good business practice. On one level. Save. Stockpile. Hoard. Hoard, not like the TV show, not like a reverse Marie Kondo situation, not like the proliferation of self-storage units that dot our landscape, though those things do raise important questions. But act as if you can never have too much. Act like you have so much, but can never contemplate, envision, given any of it away. I will tear down my barns, build bigger ones, hold on to everything I have, and more, and I will live large. Live like a king.

Except. Except. Life, or in this case, death, had other plans. God speaks in this parable, and calls the man, the rich man, overflowing with abundance, home. He dies. In their imagined conversation, God asks the man who will benefit from all that he has, now that he is gone. All that acquisition. All that production. All that stockpile. In case the point was missed, Jesus concludes, speaking to his original inquisitor and to a broader audience – “so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” So it is.

Not only would Jesus not wade into the domestic dispute of a family inheritance, but he also insists that his questioner, and perhaps others, ask the wrong question. *Not* how can I hold onto, and increase it, but how can I let go, give away, increase my abundance of gratitude and generosity rather than holding on – being greedy – about what I have, money and power and everything else.

This passage has been used for more than a few stewardship sermons, and for good reason. And who am I to get in the way of a Jesus parable that encourages financial generosity. And it *is* about stewardship in that sense.

Yet, it is also about stewardship in a prior sense. Jesus seems to be saying much more than simply we should give things away because we might die at any moment, though there is that. He is saying, at a deeper level, that the rich landowner had it all wrong from the start. It was never about acquiring, about building barns and bigger barns, and bigger barns. One's life is about abundance, Jesus says, just not abundance of things.

I will never be a fan of bumper sticker theology, but if I were, some might say: “the best things in life aren't things” or “do your possessions possess you?” or “how much is enough?” But it goes even deeper than that. These are questions of value and worth that Jesus lifts up, and that we contend with day by day.

Do we wonder how what we have forms our own perceptions of value and worth or do we wonder how what we do with what we have shapes and forms us? And, most importantly, do

we ever ask what role God plays in all of this, if any. How does our faith give shape to our ethical choices, our financial ones, our approach to the world?

Meda Stamper writes that this is a parable that “illustrates simply and memorably the futility of choices made in isolation from the love of God and neighbor...It reflects a central theme in (the gospel) ... the problem of wealth in the context of the holy kingdom where closeness to God is life and attachment to things reflects soul-stifling anxiety and fear.”

The problem is not the abundant harvest, the bumper crop. It is what you do with it.

Elisabeth Johnson writes: “The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself, and because he believes that he can secure his life with his abundant possessions.”

Johnson continues: “The rich man’s land has produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude... He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time.”

David Lose writes: “Jesus doesn’t warn against money, wealth, or material abundance. He warns against greed, about the insatiable feeling of never having enough. The farmer’s problem isn’t that he’s had a great harvest, or that he’s rich, or that he wants to plan for the future. The farmer’s problem is that his good fortune has *curved his vision* so that everything he sees starts and ends with himself.”

Chelsey Harmon writes: “Self-focused can become selfish, oblivious to the true source of these good earthly things and oblivious to their purpose in God’s world.”

Is the farmer us? Are we the farmer?

Perhaps...perhaps not. The good news is that God knows our heart, and none of us, following Jesus, is to judge, ultimately, the other. But before we say “that’s not me” too quickly, remember that this is about priority and perspective, and not a number. Maybe we do not need to build a new warehouse to store our accumulated stuff, or hire a team of advisors to advise the team of advisors about what do to with our portfolio.

But wherever we are, we know in our hearts that we are susceptible to the message of marketers and commercials and our own fears and anxieties – that more is better, that more is safety and security, that more becomes the measurement of how we perceive our very value as a human.

Lose writes that “most of us are seduced by the same message that captures the soul of the farmer in Jesus’ parable.”

It may be interesting to note that the rich landowner’s conversation is an internal one. He talks to himself. It’s a parable, so we can imagine – was there a spouse, a friend? Were there children? And what was this man’s conversations with God like before God shows up to deliver the fatal news?

This is certainly a conversation about values, and ethics. It’s a conversation about money, but about so much more than money. Being rich toward God – and that is clearly the calling here – is about understanding abundance in a new way, not about opulence, or acquisition, or soul value equaling portfolio value. Being rich toward God means that we affirm God to be the giver of all good things.

We are stewards, caretakers, but never protectors or guards. True abundance happens when our money, our hope, our time, our relationships, our love, our very selves – are seen as gifts, gifts to be invested for a while, and then given away, in measures of extravagance that can only begin to echo God’s extravagance toward us. Amen.