

Rich toward God

Hosea 11:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Having just spent a week helping my parents move out of their house and into a retirement community, I am acutely aware of the accumulation of stuff that happens over a lifetime. Knowing that many of you have recently made a similar move, I am also acutely aware that I may be preaching to the choir this morning! Luke alone tells the story of a certain rich man and his accumulated stuff. What is clear in the parable is that he thought his problem had to do with storage room. “What shall I do,” he asked, “for I have nowhere to store my crops.” It is the perennial human problem. What shall we do when basements no longer suffice, closets take on a Fibber Magee and Molly quality, walls cannot accommodate the preponderance of pictures or the baby finally needs a room of her own? “I will do this,” the rich man says to himself. “I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods.” It is a logical and familiar solution—especially if interest rates are at an historic low. You cannot afford *not* to build an addition, add a wing, tear down a wall or two.

If the rich man’s problem is space, then what he has chosen to do is both logical and financially responsible. But that is not his problem. The point of the parable is simply that this rich man is missing the point of his life. *He* thinks his problem is space, and in that light he knows that he can solve his problem with the help of a contractor. In fact, he even thinks a barn will be the solution to *all* of his problems, imagining that once the barns are built and his riches safely stored away, he will be able to say to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry!”

But before he can hire an architect to draw up the plans, another voice enters the story, a voice that leaves the rich man speechless. “Fool!” God says. “This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The question is not a question of space but of possession. Not what belongs to us and what shall we do with it, but to whom do we belong and what shall we do with our one, precious, unrepeatable life. “Take care!” Jesus says. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

To wit: can we be faithful Christians and relatively fat camels at the same time? With God, Jesus says, everything is possible; and yet, as Paul says, not all things are helpful. Therefore I invite you to spend a few minutes this morning considering the sin attached with having too much stuff: the sin of greed.

Thomas Aquinas understood the sin of greed to be a sin directly against one’s neighbor, “since one man cannot abound in external riches without another man lacking them.” His understanding presumed greed to be in the category of those sins that cause a break in our relation with one another. Some today would go on to notice that Aquinas’ theological judgment rests on an economic theory of scarcity rather than abundance: more stuff for me necessarily results in less stuff for you.

As for the Reformers, for Luther and Calvin in particular, greed was a “transgression of the limit set for us in the world by God the Creator, the consequence of which is a struggle over sovereignty.” [Paul Lehmann] That is to say, there is a power struggle going on over who is really in control of our lives and our future, a struggle “that effectively prevents us from discerning what really belongs to whom, and from living accordingly.” There is something about surrounding ourselves with stuff that gives us the illusion of control over our future and so keeps us from doing business with the fact that our lives and our deaths are in God’s hand.

Of course this is not how popular opinion would characterize a Protestant take on the accumulation of possessions. Max Weber’s analysis of Reformed Protestantism and capitalism has made the sin of greed our very own, albeit greed cleverly recast in the virtue of thrift. Weber looked at the coincidence of Reformed communities--and nations committed to the accumulation of capital--and concluded that a certain kind of theology had to undergird a capitalist economy. It had to be a theology that bred persons who in no way desired enjoyment or possession per se, but who were characterized by a desire for gain. How could this be a sin?

Whereas before people worked to meet basic needs, now people worked in order to accumulate savings. Yet the reason for this seems far from the sin in question. In Calvinism, work was given a religious character and became an ethical demand. A person works not to live, but because God commands it. Calvinists believed that the work of a person was a mark of that person’s election or non-election by God. Therefore little of what is accumulated in work is spent because God expects us to keep on working, to show evidence of our productivity, rather than to seek pleasure. Weber observed that the result of this working hard and spending little is saving; and this saving will always be in search of new investments.

But unlike the Calvinists of whom Weber wrote, John Calvin espoused a different relationship of human beings to the things they possess, a kind of voluntary communitarian understanding of what we have and hold. Some explain this

by pointing to the fact that, early on in his ministry, Geneva was flooded with poor refugees. It was in this situation that Calvin preached, wrote his biblical commentaries, and led a congregation to live out its faith.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of Calvin's theology of possession involved the role deacons played 450 years ago in Geneva. Deacons were charged with the redistribution of wealth within and outside the church community. They were to keep the flow of goods and services going by calling on those who had more than they needed and, with nothing as discreet as a sealed envelope, commanding them to hand over their excess for the needs of the poor. Said Calvin, "God wills that there be proportion and equality among us, that is, each man is to provide for the needy according to the extent of his means so that no man has too much and no man had too little." Sounds like communism to me! "Let those that have riches, whether they have been left by inheritance or procured by industry and efforts, consider that their abundance was not intended to be laid out in intemperance or excess, but in relieving the necessities of the brethren."

He further believed that as the rich had responsibility to the poor, so the poor had a mission to the rich. The poor were the receivers of God, the vicars of God, the solicitors of God who offer the rich an opportunity of ridding themselves from monetary slavery, an opportunity to be saved from greed.

Calvin said all of this because he believed we were created for fellowship with one another and with God. He joined Paul in proclaiming that we are members of one body...that we are made to live in mutuality...that another person's need is embraced as though it were our own...that all goods are from God and are to be used in the service of others.

In short, Weber was right in connecting Calvin's thought to the rich. However, like the rich man in the parable, he missed the point. For what Calvin proclaimed in his day was not what it was to be rich in goods and so greedy, but what it meant to be rich toward God and so generous. How generous? Far from urging some legalistic calculation of human generosity, Calvin acknowledges that "God...nowhere specifies the sum, that, often making a calculation, we might divide between ourselves and the poor...but calls us to take the rule of love as our guide."

To take the rule of love as our guide. Calvin did not call the rich of Geneva to asceticism, but to love; which is to say that before we can do business with the sin of greed, we must first talk about our relationship to one another. "The one sin," poet Richard Howard wrote, "is to believe, indeed to behave as if we own what we love." The love and mutuality that Calvin preached was a love that sought out close quarters...required that the rich and the poor be so connected on this earth as to be one body, for that is what love requires: first, in other words, love requires your soul, your all!

To live in such nearness to one another is to discover that another's need or pain or cry is indistinguishable and might as well be your own. In the light of such love, what *belongs* to you? It is hard any longer to distinguish, but for a completely different reason than the reason with which we first began: not because we are anesthetized by our accumulated possessions against the other, but because the other's need has redeemed desire itself and, in effect, saved us from our sin.

At the same time and in the second place, we cannot draw conclusions about our relationship to possessions and do business with our greed until we know who or what it is that possesses us...until we know the One to whom we belong. Eduard Schweizer, New Testament professor and friend of this congregation, tells the story of his daughter Elizabeth when she was three years old. The Schweizers were living in a house on a steep slope outside Zurich. "Looking out of the window of the living room," Eduard says, "you saw the road some fifty feet down. Thus Elizabeth knew she was not allowed to look through the open window without being held by somebody. Now, one day there was a herd of cows coming along the road, all with bells around their necks, and Elizabeth had to see them. When we came down to the living room, she was leaning out of the open window in a fearfully dangerous position, but holding herself by her own collar. Is this not what we constantly do?" he asks. "We are holding ourselves with ever more insurance, armaments, safe investments...and all the time we are just holding ourselves, whereas the only decisive question is whether there is somebody else who holds us."

The only way we dare reconsider our relationship to possessions is if we trust there is somebody else who holds us. That somebody, of course, would be the one telling the story, the One who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but rather came so close as to embrace our pain, our need, our cries as his own, thereby redeeming our every greedy grasp by a great love. Faith would then be living in the trust that, because God has hold of us, in life and in death, we are free to let go!

It has been my experience that those who live in such a way that they are no longer sure of what belongs to them because they lives so attentively near to the other; those who trust that, in life and in death, they belong to God, also are those whose lives are marked by a profound gratitude. Gratitude is what the sated life of the rich man lacked; gratitude is what redeem us from our own relentless grasp: gratitude for the hand that holds us and the love that saves us and for the One who gave himself up that we might have life and have it abundantly—that we might be rich toward God.