

When Abundance Isn't Enough

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A few weeks ago I was invited to, and took part in, a webinar for Episcopal clergy. I know that many of you have to do these things all the time, but for those of you that don't, a webinar is like an online meeting. Someone leads the webinar, complete with a PowerPoint slideshow containing lots of poorly formatted bullet points. But instead of all gathering in some hotel ballroom, participants log in from all over the country and follow along on their computers.

This particular webinar was on changes to the clergy retirement plan, and it was even less thrilling than it sounded. I know, because I attended the webinar, along with several hundred other Episcopal priests and deacons. And so the image I want you to have in your head is of several hundred clergy, huddling over their laptop speakers, listening to a presentation on what Jesus calls "barn building," trying to figure out how to be sure we have ample goods stored up for many years.

And I tell you that not because it's a particularly funny image – whatever bit of humor in it is both wry and dry – but because it seems appropriate to start a sermon on today's gospel passage, which contains some pretty strong words from Jesus about wealth, on something of a confessional note. Neither clergy in general, nor me personally, are immune from barn building tendencies.

We'll get back to the barn building. But let's back up a bit, and look at what gets Jesus started on this subject to begin with. At first glance, this whole passage starts innocuously enough. Someone in the crowd gets himself heard, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." The way this is couched, it sounds almost reasonable. Doesn't this seem like a totally legitimate request? Surely Jesus is pro-sharing right; I suspect some parents in here have made that argument in desperation a time or two: "Now sweetie, would Jesus want you to share that toy?"

But, this is one of those places where reading this passage in the larger context of Luke's gospel would be helpful – the question, given what Jesus has just been talking about in the verses that preceded this, is stunningly irrelevant. But even apart from that, just think about it like this. Imagine Jesus as a celebrity, and something of a paparazzi mob following him, lots of people yelling. Someone's voice finds a quiet space in all the commotion and is heard. And that person's demand –not just of the most charismatic religious teacher in Israel at the time,

but of the Son of God and Lord of all creation, is “Teacher, get my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

This imaginative setting is actually a good place to do a little spiritual self-checkup. What question, would you shout, paparazzi style, at Jesus from the crowd if you could. That’s a good test of where your heart really is.

This man’s heart was with his inheritance, apparently his presently unrealized inheritance. The one thing that he was worried about, the thing to which he wanted Jesus the Messiah to bring his authority to bear, was earthly wealth. “Tell my brother...” Maybe you don’t have a brother: “Jesus, please tell the Lotto balls; ...tell the stock market;tell my business partners.”

Remember, Jesus can see into this man’s heart (as surely as he can see into our hearts). Jeremiah 17:10 says, “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind.” God can see if there’s greed lurking in there. Oh, who are we kidding – God can see how much greed is lurking there. All kinds of greed.

So Jesus looks at this guy and just sort of snaps. He knows what a spiritual obstacle material wealth can be, what an obstacle material wealth currently is for this man asking for Jesus judgment on this inheritance matter. Now look, it’s simply not the case that material wealth is opposed to spiritual wealth, no more so than it is the case that the body is opposed to the spirit. But, like the desires and motivations of the body are very strong and can overwhelm the spirit, so the desires and motivations of material wealth are very strong — potentially overwhelming, simply by the amount of attention demanded, spiritual desires.

This past week I was in the hospital room of a dying woman to give her last rites – the church’s final benediction upon the living as we commend their souls to God. She had, for only a few more hours, her life. And she had one eastern Orthodox icon, a picture of her children, her daughter, and her husband. Those things that were left to her in that final moment before her life here on earth ended, those are things that life is made of. Everything else is stripped away. An icon, picture of her children, her daughter, her husband. Not of an abundance of possessions.

Death has a way of clarifying what life is about, which is why I tell this story of the hospital room. That’s why at the end of Jesus’ parable the “rich fool” his facing his own death. But death is not simply a literary device used by Jesus and those like me who preach in his name — it’s an actual reality, coming for every single one of us. What’s artificial about the parable is the compression of time, harvest, barn planning and death all at once. For most of us, those things are spread out. Long seasons in which harvest and barn planning are allowed to proceed uninterrupted — many webinars to help us — and then death. And we do a lot of foolish thing with all that time.

But don't be confused by the time. Had he 30 more years to live, the rich fool in the parable would still have been a fool. This man is not a fool because he's rich, he is a rich man who is also a fool. And he is a fool because he has misidentified his life with his stuff. Life and stuff are clearly separable. He's dying; his stuff, the things he has prepared, is staying behind. "Whose will it be?" Jesus asks at the end of the parable.

Well, it'll belong to his children, to brothers arguing about how to divide it up and pestering the Son of God about it.

In Jesus' own terms, this is a parable about greed. Greed is desire that is not satisfied by getting the object of its desire. Greed presents us with a moving target; we think we get what we've been aiming for only to find that the bar has been raised. Greed is like a parent or teacher or boss who can never be pleased. Greed is simply unable to say, "Enough is enough," for enough is never enough.

Let's go back to this rich man. In verse 16, we learn that his land produced abundantly. This is not the problem, this is a good thing. The Bible is clear that the fertility of the land is a blessing from God. So far, everything is good. And then the rich man thought to himself, "What should I do? I can't store it all, my barns aren't big enough."

This right here is where the train comes off the track. Notice what has happened. Abundance has been turned into lack. Surplus has transformed into insufficiency.

This move, the vile mutation of abundance into lack, strikes me as a particular spiritual challenge for all of us who live in suburban American culture, because we are constantly bombarded by claims that our life is missing something, claims that it's easy to pin on advertisers, but claims we make even more compellingly to one another on social media. But it's not a problem unique to us; obviously it was true for the rich man in this parable too. There's something about the human heart that makes this natural.

Henry, who is starting first grade in a few weeks, got a new backpack recently. Addie — who has a very nice pink backpack of her very own — immediately asked the question, "Where's my backpack?" Subsequently, it was discovered that Henry's new backpack has four separate compartments accessible by external zippers. Addie's old backpack has three. Previously, this has been an abundance of zippered pockets — one was often devoted solely to a particular LEGO minifigure, since there was really no need for it. But, upon seeing Henry's four-pocket backpack, Addie's abundance suddenly turned into a lack. Just a lack of pockets, mind you, not a lack of tears. We had an abundance of those.

The ability of the devil to take two words that are basically opposites — abundance and lack — and turn them into the same thing is nothing short of supernatural. It has happened in your life, I'm sure. Probably even over something more significant than a backpack.

The rich man, having suffered this move from abundance to lack, decides to build bigger barns. "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods." And then comes the kicker, "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample good stored up for many years, relax, eat, drink and be merry.'"

Here's the thing that gets me about that line. Don't you really want to be able to say to your soul, "relax, eat, drink and be merry?" I know I do. Desperately.

But there's no way to do that if the clause that proceeds that is "Soul, you have ample treasures laid up for many years..." Some of you have more ample treasures than others, but no matter how ample the treasure, you've surely thought about how it could all be lost, and how you'd feel a little more secure if you had just a little more.

No, if you want to relax, eat, drink and be merry, the thing you need to be able to say to your soul is this: "Soul, you have ample treasures laid up in heaven."

That's not just a logical reversal of the language of today's parable; this is the language Jesus uses. We didn't read it all, but later in this chapter Jesus says, make for yourselves "an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." (Luke 12:33; see Matt 6:20).

And here's the hard truth Jesus has for us: that kind of treasure cannot be separated from the earthly kind of treasure. It's not that treasure for ourselves and treasure in heaven are the same, but rather that both treasures, earthly and heavenly, are desired by the same heart. Yours. And mine.

It's not that we can't have both kinds of treasure, but that both kinds of treasure cannot have our heart.

To put things in the right order: namely rich towards God first, and rich towards ourselves second, we've got to address that moment when things go wrong, when having too much suddenly means having too little. That moment when abundance turns into lack. That's a moment when God's blessings turn into objects of anxiety and fear, and it's terribly dangerous for our hearts and our relationship with God.

The prescribed spiritual remedy for those who have abundance but feel lack has always been generosity, most commonly in the form of giving. I heard this growing up of course; I heard lots of stewardship sermons. But I did not understand how

there was any relationship between giving and the problem of abundance turning into lack until I put generosity first in my budget. The simple act of trying to be rich towards God changes the way we think about the treasures we're storing up for ourselves.

I am, technically, a second career priest. Before I went to seminary, I wrote software for Amazon.com. I made a lot more money then — which I only mention because it's a relevant detail to this abundance / lack issue. While working there, I lived in downtown Seattle, where I neither had nor needed a car. And so on Sunday mornings I'd get up early, walk a few blocks to the bus stop, and take the bus up the hill to an Episcopal Church. If I missed the bus, I'd get a latte, croissant, and read the paper — so really it was a win-win.

Anyway, the church I went to when I caught the bus on time was no St. Andrew's, but it was a fine church, and physically much larger than ours. It was a huge concrete box, somehow both plain and also grand at the same time. I was never formally a member, but to the extent I had a church, this was it.

And I remember sitting in the pew and doing this math problem: this tiny sliver of styrofoam they're going to give me and call it bread, that can cost at most a nickel; let's say the chalice bearer gives me a healthy pour and I have another nickel's worth of wine. The clergy, there are two of them up there, and they are trained professionals with graduate degrees — let's just say \$50 an hour — we'll give them two hours to account for setup and clean up. That's \$200, divided by the 150 or so people in here — oh, say \$1.30. As I said the building was large, but it was also in temperate Seattle — let's add a quarter for my portion of the heating / cooling / lights. And maybe another quarter for bulletins and printing. Now we're up to \$1.90, I'll round it up to \$2. That's what it costs the church to have me go to church. And I'd look in my wallet, and take out a \$10, and think to myself — that's \$2 to cover my cost, and \$8 of just giving. I'm giving 500% more than cost. That's not too bad. And I'd feel even better when I saw the person in front of me put a \$5 bill in the plate.

Oh, you don't have to look so guilty. If you've done that math before, it's ok. But there are a couple problems with it — the least important one is that it completely fails to actually account for the economics of a church.

But the bigger problem was that I was just trying to pay my dues. And I wasn't really giving, because on Sunday morning, after spending money all weekend, and thinking about the bills that we're coming due, I never felt like I had enough. I was paid well — very well — and yet I still felt the stress and pressure that maybe I wouldn't have enough. I had an abundance — especially for a single 22 year old — and yet I felt a lack. I was giving out of what was left over — and I didn't really see anything left over. I was a rich fool.

On the other side of seminary, Stephanie and I made the decision to give first, and the budget off what was left. The math here is pretty simple: my income is much lower and my expenses are much higher than they were 11 years ago in Seattle. But the way my heart feels about it is much different. Then I had an abundance, but felt a lack. Now, I have a much smaller abundance, but know that I have enough. The difference is that my treasures on earth are first sacrificed as investments in heavenly riches. Putting generosity first changes our perception of what we have. What we'd otherwise be tempted to spend or sock away in barns instead gets brought out into the light of God's kingdom right here and now. I bet those of you who have moved to proportional giving or a tithe know what I'm talking about.

And it's not like I'm perfect about it or anything — I can still spend an afternoon on retirement barn planning. Greed lurks in my heart still, for sure. There is a spiritual fruit in generous stewardship that I long for you to enjoy. Would you choose generosity first, and so know that you have enough to "relax, eat, drink, and be merry," in this life and the next.

When it comes to this world, we all may be a lot less foolish for being a little less rich.