

THE RICHEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Luke 12:13-21

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4 August 2019

I sometimes listen to the Cleveland City Club Forum - they bring in impressive speakers and cover important topics. At the end of each presentation, there is a question and answer period, and one of the ground rules is, "Be sure that your question is actually in the form of a question..." Because sometimes, at presentations, people take the microphone, not because they're sincerely curious, but because they want to show off or hear themselves talk, or make a point...

In our passage for today, someone shouts out a question to Jesus...well, really it's not a question - it wouldn't pass the City Club test...this is what the person says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

Sounds familiar, doesn't it, this talk of inheritance. We've encountered this issue before in the Bible. In ancient semitic culture, inheritance was a complicated matter. Usually the eldest son received twice what a subsequent son would receive. We remember Jacob and Esau's mother Rebekah helping Jacob, the younger twin cheat Esau the older twin. We remember the story of the Prodigal Son when the youngest son demands his share of the inheritance while his father is still alive.

We don't know exactly what the issue is with this man; all we know is he's anxious to get Jesus to weigh in...he's anxious to get his money and wants Jesus to help. Does he really need the money or does he just feel victimized? Does he want more than his share? Is this a matter of sibling rivalry?

Jesus takes the opportunity to speak in more general terms about money and things and possessions, about wants and needs. But before we get to that, I want to tell you the context of this passage.

Earlier in chapter 12, Jesus says, “Do not fear”, a phrase that appears in the Bible numerous times. Then Jesus reminds the large crowd that has gathered of how much God loves each of them. He encourages them to not be hypocrites, to truly embrace the new life they have been given, and then he says again, “Do not be afraid.”

In the midst of this larger conversation about how to live according to God’s values comes this request. There’s no reason to assume that there’s anything morally wrong with the man asking for Jesus’ help. It could be that he is showing Jesus honor and respect by wanting him to assist in a family dispute.

But that’s not Jesus’ purpose, at least not on that day, with that crowd. He seizes this teaching moment, because he knows that this is an opportunity to say something wise about an issue every single person struggles with. I love how he introduces this teaching in the Revised English Bible. He says this, “Be on your guard against greed of every kind, for even when someone has more than enough, his possessions do not give him life.” Our possessions do not determine our value as human beings. Yet how often do we act as if they do?

We buy into the myth that more is always better. We are seduced into believing that the new car, the upgraded phone, the better wardrobe will somehow change us...will take away that gnawing feeling we have that we’re missing out on something someone else has. But, of course, that hunger reappears the minute we put the new clothes away in the closet.

On the treadmill at the gym one day this spring, I looked around and more than half of the television screens were turned to the HGTV Network...person after person was watching a home in Waco, Texas becoming transformed from lackluster dull to contemporary chic. Now there's nothing wrong with that as entertainment, nothing at all, but I wonder what happens to us if we watch it for hours a day. How much do we start to feel dissatisfied with what we have? How much do we start to believe that an upgraded family room would instantly cause our family to be happier?

We are fed these myths constantly; we are bombarded with the message that there is something that we can buy, something that we can invest in, something external that will give us life and joy.

It's so easy to begin to believe it. For one thing, because these messages are so pervasive. But also because we are, at our core, afraid. We're afraid that everyone else is happier than we are. We're afraid that everyone else's family is more functional, everyone else's marriage is more solid. We're afraid that we don't look good enough, that we don't measure up. We're afraid that we're not worthy of love, of the love of another person or the love of God. That fear has always been around. It's why the Bible tells us to not be afraid. That fear makes us vulnerable to these messages. Just a few more thousand dollars in the bank and you'll feel less afraid. A new hair color and a new diet will make you feel more secure. We desperately search on the outside for something to satisfy us, calm our fears, make us feel OK about ourselves. But this is a hunger that can only be satisfied by turning inward.

It is only when we listen to the inner voice, to God's wisdom speaking to us, that we will feel worthy and secure. God says to us, "You are enough, just as you are, so

don't be afraid. I am giving you a way of life that will satisfy you if you will only listen and follow.”

In the Hebrew scriptures, that way of life is described this way: “Take care of the widow and the orphan and the stranger; extend hospitality to those who are most vulnerable.” In the New Testament, it's summarized this way: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” In other words, thinking about other people liberates us from being so suffocatingly focused on ourselves, and thinking about other people helps us to create communities of love and support that provide rich blessings.

Jesus tells a parable to help his listeners, his students, visualize this lesson. Imagine, he says, that there is a very rich man who is such a successful farmer that he has more produce than he needs, so much more that he continues to build more and more barns. Here's the man's speech in the Message version of the Bible: “What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.’ Then he said, ‘Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’” I, I, I. That's this man's problem. It's not the fact that he's wealthy, it's not the fact that he's successful. It's the fact that he's completely self-centered, absolutely blind to the needs of anyone around him.

People of faith are not called to live as paupers; there is nothing wrong with having enough for our own needs. Last week we talked about balance, and the lesson applies today as well. The faithful life is a life that is attentive to the needs of others, and shares generously. The faithful life says “we” as much as “I.”

The God who loves us unconditionally, the God who wants us to enjoy the gift of life, teaches us this BECAUSE God knows that what really makes us experience joy is serving others and nurturing relationships in community. Service is intrinsically rewarding - we can see that in the lives of our students when they return from their mission trips. We feel it this weekend as we are involved in pursuits that make a difference for good and create real, lasting, meaningful hope. There is no substitute for being a part of a community of people who care for each other, support each other, work together and bring out the best in each other. No house remodeling project will make you feel as good; not even the fanciest boat or the most exotic vacation will satisfy you as much as when you are giving of yourself in the context of community.

We have talked before about the epidemic of loneliness and how it affects people of all generations. This week a new study came out from a polling and market research company - my daughter shared this news with me. It's about members of the millennial generation, those who are today ages 23 to 38. All five of our children are in this age category, as well as some of our church staff and many of our church members, so I care about this tremendously. Here's what the study said. 30% of millennials say they often or always feel lonely. 22% of millennials said they have ZERO friends. Zero.

Friends, we have an antidote for that in the church. Jesus has taught us how to have the richest life possible - it is a life of community and generosity; it is a life of service.