

PR13.C
Quotes from Lawrence Wood,
Christian Century, July 27, 2004

10th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
August 5, 2007

Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14;2:18-23
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”
¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Jesus told a story. A man kept accumulating things. He had to find more places to store the things he got and he kept getting them anyway. He piled one possession on top of another and he was very happy to do it. He congratulated himself on his security for the future. That’s when he died. Apparently, back in Jesus’ day there were people who amassed *things* (whether they had anyplace to put them or not) because they found security in doing that, or maybe they just couldn’t pass up a bargain. Anyway, I’m glad people don’t do that sort of thing anymore.

I looked in the Yellow Pages under “storage”. There are twenty-nine pages of advertisements for businesses that will rent you a place to put the stuff that won’t fit in your house. They are building more. There are companies and stores that specialize in selling containers and shelves and that sort of thing for your home so you can get to stuff you don’t need more easily. On your way home from church, count the cars that are parked in driveways and wonder how many are there because the garages are full.

Given the demographics of where we live, many people move regularly. That’s a staggering nuisance but there are advantages which you will remember whenever you meet someone who has lived in the same house since the last month of the Eisenhower

administration. One never knows when some clothes are going to come back in style. And every time the Book of the Month club has an exciting introductory offer it seems like you ought to join again. It's nice to have friends and a friend can't take a trip without bring a souvenir. Covetousness and sloth are only two of the seven deadly sins, but they can combine to make quite a mess.

People almost never try to make the case that they *need* many of those things – just that they wouldn't be happy if they didn't have them.

Lawrence Wood is a pastor in Fremont, Michigan. He wrote about a similar situation he witnessed, "Ed and Edna's place is pretty typical, I think. Her cupboards, bureaus, cabinets, garage, attic and spare bedroom have been crammed full of things that define her. ("Oh, you know Edna Furbelow," says her neighbor, "she collected Hummels.") Every once in a while, Edna took some of the clutter out to the front yard and sold it, although no one stepping inside her house ever knew the difference. Now that Edna has died...everything must go. It's too bad she's not here for the lesson, because there's something morally instructive about an estate sale. Absent the owners, the items lose their meaning, so that even Ed and Edna's kids and closest friends think, '...What a lot of junk!'...Now the auctioneer calls out Lot 152, a collection of 400 hundred Hummels. Eyes roll and knowing smiles break out, but no one bids. ... It's almost possible to hear Jesus asking, *And these Hummels, whose will they be?*"

I am grateful to Pastor Wood for that description – but we've all seen what he is describing. He is describing our time-honored agreement that security depends on **things**. Other people collect worthless junk but, somehow we think *our* stuff is different. We are never around to learn the lesson – because it's after we die that they have the estate sale. We've heard the explanations given as things are accumulated: "This is an investment." "We'll use this for a long time." "When you think how much more expensive some things are, this is really

practical.” And all the other things that we say when we try to make the case that getting more things is really a demonstration of wisdom.

To suggest that the accumulation of things might be a *burden* could be interpreted as a negative reflection on a person’s education and good sense.

Jesus warned us about trying to buy security with things. Just like he warned us about violence, lying, adultery, and foolishness. This, too, is destructive behavior that will lead us to no good. Security does not come from gathering things. Our own experience teaches us that accumulation comes to nothing.

Jesus does not chide anyone for wanting security. He thinks security is a good idea.

Jesus wants us to have the wisdom to know security when we see it.

Jesus doesn’t call us to a life of poverty and want, he gives us guidance on *real* wealth. He told a sad story and ended it by saying, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” Jesus is squarely in favor of being rich – but he wants to break humanity’s conspiracy to reduce true wealth to no more than a gathering of stuff.

“Someone in the crowd said to (Jesus), ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’.” Jesus doesn’t tell him how to get his share of the inheritance. (Which would have been the really *useful* kind of information that we sometimes **want** from our religion.) Jesus didn’t tell him that he should turn his back on money because he ought to be too holy for that sort of thing. (Which would have been the kind of *pious instruction* we sometimes **expect** from our religion.) Jesus didn’t give the man what he **wanted**; and he didn’t give the man what he **expected**. Jesus said, “Why are you wasting time with irrelevancies?” What if you *do* get a lot of money? You’ll never be satisfied. It won’t make you happy. And then you’ll die.

Let’s talk about a life worth living. Let’s talk about what *will* satisfy you; what *will* make you happy. Let’s talk about those things that you will think back on when it is time for you die.

Do you suppose it will be the stuff in your garage? Or the number of zeros on your bank statement? **You can be rich toward God!**

Your life can have depth and meaning. You can provide for your family with a wealth beyond anything you can imagine. You can accumulate wisdom. You can sock away an appreciation for God's world. You can spend your time doing admirable things – even when no one admires them.

Jesus wants us to be rich and he's got a better definition of wealth than the first one that might come to our minds.

When Jesus told the story of the man who spent his life gathering his riches together, he started by observing facts. It wasn't a story of what we *should* do or what bad habits we *should* avoid. Jesus simply observed that some people accumulate a lot of stuff and they die just like everybody else and then how valuable are those things that have been accumulated? In the story, God says, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus does not give advice with this story. **He just describes the world as we have all seen it and invites us to order our priorities according to what we can observe just as clearly as he can.**

In the gospels, Jesus talks a lot about money. Talking about money can make us uncomfortable but Jesus does it anyway and he's doing it again in this story. But he is not giving ethical advice. He doesn't ask us to *decide* what to do with our money. He doesn't outline the right principles to consider when we make *choices* about our money. He says, "I already *know* how much money you are going to give. You're going to give it all. You don't have any choices and you can't make any decisions about your property. When you die you don't own a thing."

Jesus calls us to value our lives as much as he does. He wants them spent on a lifetime of love. He wants our service to each other. He wants our imagination and courage that will go

beyond trying to keep ourselves safe and secure. He wants us to teach our children the joy of giving.

After I looked in the Yellow Pages and found twenty-nine pages of advertisements for storage sheds, I looked up Lutheran Churches. It's not exactly a scientific survey, but I have about reached the conclusion that we live in a society that would rather have an empty building where people can put stuff they don't need than a building where they can gather to serve God. That is a society that needs the message we have to offer.

We are called to tell that world that their lives are more valuable than they know. We need to tell people that Jesus has more to teach them than how to get more money out of their brother. We have the mission to tell people God loves them.

No Hummels were harmed in the writing of this sermon.