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Focusing On What's Important

Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

“This is the way it works with people who accumulate riches for themselves, but are not rich in God.”

And so Jesus ends his parable about the rich farmer who had to build larger barns in order to hoard his wealth for himself.

The rich farmer who was not able to enjoy any of the wealth he had because he died unexpectedly.

The rich farmer who was so concerned about securing his future that he forgot about his present.

There are several messages that we might take from this short parable:

- It is definitely a story condemning greed and materialism as false security.
- It's also about living for the present
- and living for what is most important.

Both the author of Colossians and Jesus specifically condemn greed in our scripture readings tonight. And indeed greed is a cause or at a least contributing factor to many of humanity's problems.

We can see this just in looking at a few recent news stories:

- Congressman Rangel of New York being investigated for financial ethics violations.
- BP taking short cuts on safety measures, contributing to one of the worst oil spills in history.
- Northwest Airlines fined for price fixing.

- Resistance to universal health care.

Much of our life,
much of our energy,
and many of our fears focus on money.
And we do need money – we need money to eat, to provide shelter, to clothe ourselves.

But we also look to money for security and happiness. We think if only we had a little more money than everything would be all right. If only we could save a little more.

Or, if we're feeling down, what are we tempted to do for a lift? Go shopping! As if the latest electronic gadget or a new shirt was going to solve everything for us.

And, of course, after a little while the novelty wears off and we're looking for the next thing that we can buy in the hopes all of our problems will suddenly go away. But, eventually, we realize this route doesn't work.

Greed is not in our best interests and it isn't in the best interests of society or Creation.

In a few minutes I'll be reading some words from the late Catholic monk Wayne Teasdale about the spiritual pros and cons of money. So, I don't want to dwell on that too much right now.

Instead, if greed is what we are being warned against, then what is it that we are being called to?

Jesus ends his parable with that line: “This is the way it works with people who accumulate riches for themselves, but are not rich in God.”

To be rich in God. That is what Jesus is telling us we need. It is even implied in this statement that riches for

yourself are perhaps a good thing – or at least not damaging – if you are also rich in God.

But what does he mean? How can one be rich in God? If to be rich in money is to have lots of money, then perhaps to be rich in God is

- to have lots of God in your life.
- To live in God's presence,
- to live in relationship with God.
- To be talking and listening to God in our lives.

We might also think about where God manifests:

In people,
in nature,
in prayer,
in silence,
in love,
in relationships,
in helping and loving our neighbor.

Perhaps to be rich in these things is to be rich in God.

- To always love our neighbor,
- to live in constant prayer and love,
- to be in relationship with each other,
- to commune with nature.

These are ways, I think, to be rich in God.

Jesus tells us not to worry about seeking wealth, but to seek these things that make us rich in God. For wealth does not make us secure, but being rich in God does.

And I think this is something we need to take to heart as a church, too. Some of the issues we went through last year, I believe, were at least in part due to worry and stress over money.

And as a small church that is living on the edge financially, we do need to pay some attention to money

and meeting our financial obligations. And I hope, unlike the rich farmer in Jesus' parable, that we are all striving to be generous with our giving.

But, as a church we need to be focused on what's important. Wealth should never be the focus for a church. It should not be our obsession. To do so is to let *wealth* become our God.

Just as we individually need to be rich in God, we as a church community also need to be rich in God:

- To always love our neighbor,
- to live in constant prayer and love,
- to be in relationship with each other,
- to commune with nature.

Brian Taylor, in his book “becoming human: Core Teachings of Jesus,” talks of scarcity thinking and abundance thinking¹ in relationship to this parable.

Scarcity thinking is what the rich farmer does... he thinks that he will never have enough, that only after he can figure out how to save everything will he be comfortable.

Scarcity thinking is believing we always need just a little more and *then* we can be generous. Just a little more money and *then* maybe we can do that mission project.

Abundance thinking, on the other hand, is about giving generously without fear: This is what we have to use so let's see how much we can make that do...

We, individually and as a church, need to give up our fears about money and be generous – not to spend wildly or irresponsibly, but to use what we have available generously and see what kind of miracles we can stretch it into.

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And to do this we have to have that richness in God first. We need to be about God in our lives and learn to trust that God is always leading us where we need to go.

Or, as the author of Colossians puts it, we need to set our hearts on higher things. As Christians, we put aside our old selves, selves that value greed instead of the richness of God, selves that value selfishness, selves that value that which is detrimental to both relationships with God and with each other.

And we are called to move beyond relationship busting behaviors and put on a new self, a new self in the image of the Creator where all are equal, all are in Christ and Christ is in all.

Where we are all of one body living in the realm of God. Where we are rich in God, valuing that which “support[s] healthy relationships: peacemaking, compassion, generosity, hospitality, respect, affection, love.”²

And so our scripture lessons tonight warn us against greed and call us to focus on what is most important. But we are also called to do this in the present. We're not storing things up for our future security or even storing up so we can go to heaven.

We are called to focus on what is important, being rich in God, in the present. The rich farmer died and never got

to enjoy his wealth. We should not get so caught up in worrying about money or anything else that we forget to enjoy our richness in God – available to all who seek it.

Richness in God, living in God's realm, is meant for now, here on this earth, in our present time.

To let go of our fear, our fear of lacking, not having enough... our supposed lack of money, our supposed lack of security.

To let go of our fear and trust God, to be rich in God, is to be set free, it is to be lead from death to life.

And that is the image I hope you will have in your hearts and heads, especially during our last two songs tonight. One of which talks about God setting us free to dream, to grieve, to be, to live.

And the other which asks God to lead us from death to life, teaching us the way of compassion.

These things are what it means to be rich in God, to live in God's realm, to be free of fear, trusting God for our security instead of the pursuit of greed.

Let us end the message tonight with a prayer:³

“Holy One, who satisfies our souls with good things,
Empower us to set our minds on you,
not on things [born from greed and fear.]
Fill any emptiness and fear with your grace.
Give us the courage to set aside that which perishes,
and to live in freedom —
speaking truth,
offering bread, shelter and comfort to others,
trusting in you, our Freedom, our Truth, our Bread.
In the name of Jesus, giver [of] all good gifts,
Amen.”

² Rick Marshall, <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-08-01.shtml>.

³ Adapted from <http://www.hrc.org/scripture/index.asp?page=08-05-07>