

WHEN TOO MUCH IS NOT ENOUGH

LUKE 12:13-34

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Apropos of this morning's Scripture lesson some of America's high end/high profile criminals are now being sentenced. Martha Stewart. The Rigases. Kenneth Lay is on deck. There is more sadness than satisfaction here.

But leave it to the *New Yorker* to locate a little gallows humor. A recent issue pictured four portly execs, hands behind their backs, displaying their restraining devices: "Cuffwear, 2004" is the title of the cartoon.

There's the simple, elegant looking "Cartier's Execucuff"; the diamond-studded Tiffany version called "The Incarcerator"; for the frugal CEO Walmart offers its "plastic perp"; and for those cold-weather arrests and readings-of-your-rights Ronco's "Cuffmuff" is what the doctor ordered.

The question is of course what could people in those positions possibly have wanted with more money when they already possessed an abundance far exceeding what most mortals could ever imagine. What drives such fierce accumulation?

When the man in today's story asks Jesus to tell the man's brother to share the family inheritance Jesus wants nothing to do with it not because he was dodging a tough question but because it is the wrong question. So he issues the man a warning, "be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he tells the parable of a farmer whose land produces so prolifically his storage system is too small to house the harvest. And what we get is the snapshot of a life *that is* equated with an abundance of possessions.

We have only to look to the recent news to see how current Jesus' parable is. On July 15 Microsoft awarded an unprecedented onetime, \$3 dividend per share to stockholders. You Microsoft fans are aware of this. I know my pension plan benefited.

Like the man in the parable this is a huge windfall for some people. One Microsoft exec gets over a billion dollars. Bill Gates more than three and a half billion.

The farmer in the parable thinks his problem is small warehouses. "What should I do?" he asks, "for I have no place to store my crops. I know what I will do. I will tear down my old barns and build larger ones then I will say to my soul: 'soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But the real problem is the man has slipped into that realm of darkness where life is defined by possessions.

Lest you think this happens only to billionaires I assure you it does not. Last week as I drove by the big N.Y. State lotto sign on Rt. 33 the \$37 million jackpot caught my eye.

My wife and I have been contemplating how we are going to handle two college tuitions. I saw 37 million and started fantasizing. No more tuition problem. No more deferred maintenance for our house problem. That new carbon fiber bicycle – the one like Lance Armstrong rides that I have been coveting – no problem.

I say the man has slipped into the realm of darkness. How easily it happens. How unobtrusively. How subtle the shift. How seductive. It is why Genesis pictures the tempter in the garden as a snake. You can hear the slippery language and logic.

What wrong has the man committed? There is nothing here of graft or theft.

There is no mistreatment of workers or any criminal act. That farmer and those Microsoft billionaires are not Martha Stewart or the Rigases.

To the contrary, sun, soil and rain have joined to make him wealthy.

Didn't his father used to say something like 'the Lord helps those who help themselves?' That Microsoft dividend? President Bush's tax cut on stock gains makes such dividends wise business decisions and boosts the economy. For goodness sake, our farmer subscribes to the Wall St.

Journal, agrees with most of the editorials. He's a member of Rotary.

A war veteran. Wears an American flag lapel pin. Even files the Schedule H household employment tax for his cleaning woman and driver.

Clean as a whistle. Not a shred of injustice here. So what's the problem? Verse twenty. Seventh word in. "Fool." The man is a fool.

I didn't say it. His hired hands don't say it. The Agway clerk doesn't say it.

God says it. "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Life defined by possessions. Life defined by an abundance of possessions. Why 'fool'? Because in the Bible one who does not acknowledge the existence of God is a fool. Living such a life is the equivalent of living in darkness. It looks foolish. Not from a business perspective. From a human perspective. Because possessions have replaced God's leading and purpose for your life. You don't even have to own the possessions. All you have to do is crave them. That carbon fiber bicycle! It puts goods in the place of God, completely focuses on self, ignores others. Oh, you can indulge others assuaging guilt. But the goal is to justify self-indulgence.

The word "fool" is more descriptive than angry. Rather it is the exclamation point after the word that signals God's displeasure. "This night your soul is required of you," says the Lord, "you will be foreclosed upon tonight even though you don't have a mortgage. You will be foreclosed upon and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

If you are defined by what you have, or by what you do, or by where you are, what happens when you don't have anything, and you are nobody, and you don't do anything anymore? Who are you?

Isn't that the big question of aging in America? Somewhere around the age of fifty, if not before then, to the day we die we start giving things up. Health. Friends. Independence. Material possessions. Work. Pleasures. And if our lives have been defined by possessions aging will be a very scary thing. For you see, this story is not about money or wealth or prudence or prosperity. Jesus does not praise or condemn these. What disturbs Jesus and upsets God is how willing we are to gain the world and lose our lives. At 18 or 80 a life lost to possessions is a tragic thing.

The problem has reached epidemic proportions in society. One member of our church laments what he calls the ‘commodifying’ of life. He happens to be an attorney. But you see it everywhere. No longer is his practice about the relationship with the client. It is about ‘billable’ hours. Everything has a price. Everything is a commodity. Everything is a potential possession or revenue center to generate resources for more acquisition.

The other word is ‘materialism.’ We are spiritually starving as a society. But we are overdosing on the junk food of materialism. When is too much not enough? When we don’t realize it and our relationships and lives are shrouded in darkness.

It may seem a harsh verdict to hear God call that farmer a fool, or those who build casinos and skyscrapers; who host talk shows; build media empires; swing golf clubs or dribble basketballs or play baseball for millions and whom we regard as heroes. But if someone asked me as a pastor why do I think the American family is in trouble I wouldn’t cite Hollywood’s sex and violence in the movies. Nor would I blame the gay rights movement. I would say materialism. People literally working themselves to death, out of marriage, out of nurturing family life.¹ Our favorite show is, “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.” What does that say?

In one sense, however, today’s story *is* about treasure. Not what you have or even what you leave or give away or do. Those are not riches. Treasure is in who you are. And where your heart is. Ultimately that treasure is defined in terms of the relationship you have with God and is the only thing we will ever ‘take with us’ at the end of this life.

The good news is that you are here today. That says you have already gotten Jesus’ point. You are not here for advice on investments or a program on making yourself healthy, wealthy and wise. Jesus isn’t into that game and we know it.

You are not here today to get something out of him but because you love him. You are here because you have found at least some of your treasure in him. And so your heart belongs, on a good day anyway, to him. The rest of the world is elsewhere. On a morning like this one they’re chasing a little white ball or perusing the Times over a croissant or maybe still sound asleep. What matters is you are here. Willing to risk hearing what Jesus has to say even when his words are tough.

We never hear from this disgruntled son of the father who died again. There are lots of people in the Bible we never hear from again. The rich young ruler. The nine lepers Jesus healed. The Levite and the priest who passed that lone, beaten Samaritan on the road.

But you are here, willing to listen, risk the truth, change your life if need be. And the good news is that’s all he expects of any of us. Jesus told these stories to his disciples, to those who stuck it out with him. And eleven of them did stick it out despite his challenging them to grow up and go deeper.

Like the man in today’s story he will answer the questions we ask that are worth answering. The others that trivialize or demean life or keep us in the mode of ‘gain-the-world-but-lose-your-life’ – those questions he refuses to answer. But if we hang in there with him and keep coming back eventually we’ll catch on and let go. We’ll find our real treasure in the One who loves to teach and save fools like us. Amen.

ⁱ William Willimon, "Majoring in the Minors," Pulpit Resource, July – September, 2004, 21.