

Lifestyles of the Rich and Foolish¹

Our lesson today takes a familiar structure. We have a parable, the Parable of the Rich Fool, embedded in a fleeting incident in Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is in the midst of teaching and a man makes his way to Jesus and appeals to him to intervene in a family dispute over his father's estate. We all know of painful family rifts that result over the division of the wealth of a deceased family member. When I read of this man, my mind locks on a middle age man who was a cook at a restaurant, lived with his mother, and made it his life quest to extract from his estranged father alimony. He would even make announcements in church whenever there was a development in his case of when laws pertaining to alimony would change. Somehow life just wasn't right until dad was made to pay up.

Our imagination fills in the details. This man was counting on receiving an inheritance. Maybe he had made plans that were contingent on that windfall. Maybe he was going to move or retire or buy a new home. But the inheritance didn't come through. Now, he can think of nothing else. He sees Jesus in a crowd and doesn't think, "Hey, this guy's really wise, this teacher may be the Messiah." He's thinking, "I'll bet my brother would listen to Jesus."

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on August 1, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA. Additional sermons and other information may be found at www.fpclagrange.org.

Of course, Jesus will have none of this. Already there is a big falling out in this family. Jesus isn't going to make it an absolute reality by weighing in on one side. Jesus is uncharacteristically harsh in addressing the man not by name, not even respectfully, but by simply saying "man."

Then Jesus offers a couple of insights and tells a parable. Beware he says of getting so wrapped up in possessions that you miss the important things about life. Clearly, he sees this obsessive focus in the man who comes with the off-the-wall request that Jesus adjudicate the family estate.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a rich man who has a bumper crop and makes calculations on how to store it. The man ponders his situation. What is striking is that his deliberations are entirely self-enclosed. The text says he discussed the matter with himself. He said, "Self, what shall I do?" This detail would have struck the original hearers as strange. Middle Eastern village life entailed lots of talk with family and neighbors before a decision was made. I have a windfall, how am I going to deal with it all? In many places there would have been hours of discussion with the family, the elders, with the cousins, with the elders at the village gate before a decision was made. But the man in the parable talks

only with himself. So, suddenly, we're listening to Jesus tell this story and the man feels lonely. He's rich, but solitary.

His decision is to tear down his existing barns—imagine barns, plural—anyway, these are to come down and be replaced by super barns. All the while he is saying to himself: "Self, you will have plenty so to have years of ease and security. He quotes out of the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Relax, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself." So that's the plan.

Now, that verse from Ecclesiastes was a bit longer. An alert listener to Jesus may have remembered that. The verse actually reads, "I command enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink, and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun." The man in his planning for self-sufficiency conveniently forgot the part about God giving the days that a person has to live in.

Not only was the excess wealth a gift of God, but so also were the days that one has to use that wealth. So, just as the man with the bumper crop is planning his barn building project, he dies. The text puts it in an interesting fashion. "That night his life was required of him." Behind that particular expression is the idea that God loans us life and all the goods that come our way. And, in the end, God will call in what he

has lent out. Life is like a loan. There reaches a point when we must give it back to God. In this text it is as if God is calling in his loans. He is calling in the life he gave for a period of time.

Here's where this story begins to be haunting. It is as if suddenly there is an estate to be had. Did the rich man have sons or heirs to will his property to? We don't know. All of a sudden there is a pile of money that will not be enjoyed by the one who worked for it. Is it possible that Jesus, in some way, is giving to the man who wanted justice from his brother, a description of how the estate that he so yearned for came into being? In other words, is it possible that the aggrieved man's father was something like the rich man with the windfall? Maybe the pile of wealth that the man in the crowd so lusted for was always tainted. It didn't make dad happy. And now it threatens the son. Naturally, we don't know the answers to these questions. But I believe that they shimmer on the edges as we think about what Jesus is saying to us.

Did you know that Jesus teaches more about money than he does about prayer? You see, there is in the mind of Jesus a certain this-worldliness. Jesus sees the real action of God and life not in another spirit-world or in heaven or in another dimension, but in the here and now world that we all live in.

So what happens with money, everyday relationships, and power is where the action is. How you and I manage our lives in this world is where the real spiritual drama is played out.

I just learned last week about a Japanese social phenomenon called the *hikikomori*? The typical *hikikomori* is a young man, usually the son of affluent parents, living at home who abandons his work or education, refuses to see his friends and retreats into his bedroom. Due to the economic downturn in Japan, he has little hope of duplicating his father's productive life in the corporate world. Instead, he spends all his time alone, playing computer games, browsing the internet and emerging only for late-night shopping expeditions to refresh his supply of comics. There are so many such young men in Japan, well over a million, that the phenomenon threatens to dampen the Japanese economy.

I mention the *hikikomori*, which at present is a completely Japanese phenomenon as an example of how affluence can be a soul-eroding experience. What we're learning in our lesson is that wealth, by no means, is a neutral good. It's all important to manage what God brings into our lives in such a way so to advance God's purposes.

If Jesus—in his day of subsistence living--judged it necessary to return to the topic of material possessions and wealth more than virtually any other subject, how much more

important are his insights to you and me? If we believe that security and happiness are to be found in acquisition, saving and buying, we're likely sadly mistaken. If we believe that being deprived of affluence that we think others have—like the aggrieved man—is the end of happiness, we are equally mistaken. The wisdom arising out of Jesus' words this morning takes wealth off its pedestal and reminds us that all we have, and the time we have to steward it is a gift of God.