

SERMON – 8TH PENTECOST
LUKE 12:13-21
AUGUST 4, 2019

“OUR MONEY...OR OUR LIFE”?

Comedian Jack Benny, from television's 1950's golden age, developed a reputation for being a real tightwad. In one of his most famous skits, he's walking down the street when suddenly he's approached by a robber who points a gun at him and shouts; "*Your money or your life!*" There's a long pause. Jack does nothing. The robber looks around nervously, becomes agitated and finally shouts; "*Well?*" Jack calmly replies, "*Don't rush me, I'm thinking it over.*"

Our lesson today from Luke could be subtitled "*Your money is not your life*". While Jesus is teaching a large crowd a man shouts out; "*Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance of our father.*" Jewish law prescribed that at the death of a father, the elder son received 2/3 of the inheritance, and the younger received 1/3. Luke doesn't say but this is likely a younger son complaining about the inherent unfairness of it all. Though authorized as a rabbi to mediate these kinds of disputes, Jesus wanted no part of a family financial fight. He had come to unite the world to God, not help it divide its possessions. Moreover, the young man didn't want arbitration - he wanted Jesus to agree with his notion of fairness with regard to inheritances.

A legal dispute immediately becomes the occasion for a story about a man who had plenty to divide owing to a run of prosperity. He became so prosperous in fact that his barns could not hold all of his crops. His solution was more storage. With his financial security in hand, he could sit back and truly enjoy life. Note Jesus doesn't denounce the man for his good fortune or for being successful. But he does, unambiguously give an economics lesson from the Kingdom of God...success is not in storage...but in distribution.

Once again in the gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about money. Or rather money is something his listeners want to talk about. And yet this is not a parable about money per se. It's a parable about life. Jesus never disputes that we can store goods, but what we can't do, clearly, is store time. Jesus calls the man a fool not because he was rich, or fortunate, or enterprising, but because he was naïve about that which he could not keep, and self absorbed about the things that for a time at least, he could. He was a fool not because he had full barns, but an empty heart, and all kinds of blind spots about what life was really about.

The great 4th century Christian teacher St. Augustine said "*this man failed to see that the bellies of the poor were much safer storehouses than his own barns*". It's all right to make investments, as long as we understand that the one investment any Christian's portfolio must contain is the Kingdom of God. Apparently the only futures market that concerns Jesus, and ought concern us is the one that God controls, because the only future that is sure is the one God can provide.

The man in the parable was a fool because he banked on full barns. The people of God are to make our deposits regularly and generously in the stomachs of the hungry, the minds of the uneducated, the bodies of the sick, the spirits of the oppressed, the care of creation, and the hearts and souls of those who have not heard the Gospel. Moreover, this man was a fool because he overestimated his own value in the scheme of things. Even today, with all our amazing technological ability, we know that life itself is still dependent on about 11 inches of topsoil - and the fact someone makes it rain. And that someone ain't us!

According to this parable our business in life goes far beyond real estate, investments, and grain bins. Our real business is that of humanity. In Charles Dickens classic *"A Christmas Carol"*, the ghost of Jacob Marley bristles when his former partner Ebenezer Scrooge commends him for having been *"such a good man of business"*. *"Business"*, Marley growled from under his chains; *"mankind was my business...charity and mercy and benevolence was my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my life's business"*! What we are by virtue of our baptism into Christ Jesus and his resurrection and the new life it calls us into eclipses by a thousand fold what we might become by virtue of our life's labors. That's what this story is about.

So what is our business in life? It's not to grow in stature and wealth, at least not if that stature or wealth is directed towards us. Our business in life is to grow closer to the mind of God. In our lesson, Jesus tells the crowd that we are to become *"rich towards God"*. That phrase could be translated as *"gathering riches for God"*. As the Apostle Paul once said; *"whatever you do, in word or deed, do it as unto God and not unto men"*. It is, as the Psalmist says, *"to know that the Lord is God, it is he that made us and we are his."* The lesson of this parable is that the abundance of the rich man was not the problem...his stewardship of that abundance was. Gathering is not the problem so long as we gather for the sake of the provider and distribute to his glory.

A young man who insists that Jesus *"divide"* an inheritance between he and his brother occasions this lesson. He wants what's fair. We all want fair eh? In the gospel of Luke, the word translated as *"divide"* is used only a couple of times. It's most important use is in chapter 22' verse 17 where Jesus is having a little supper with his friends - takes a cup of wine and says; *"take this and divide it among yourselves"*. Those words form the last will and testament of our Father. The inheritance of salvation divided equally – but of course, not fairly. What a wonderful thing for you and I that the grace of God is not fair – just lavish. AMEN