
Who's in Charge of Your Abundance?

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Proper 13 C

Luke 12:13-21

I feel like I've been in school this summer. I would love to tell you I had been brushing up on my Koine Greek, reading the early church fathers and mothers, or even the classics of literature. Instead my education has involved a new frontier—home renovation. This world may be well known to all of you, but frankly, I have rarely devoted any energy to it. If you had visited my house prior to this new burst of activity, you would have literally seen wall paper that was featured in a "before" ad for kitchen re-dos.

I have been excited about the projects. We've lived in our house for almost sixteen years, and it was looking a little rough around the edges. I've discovered my tastes are not the same as when I was twenty seven years old with a four month old baby. So, it has been great fun to reinvest in the place and do my part to spur the local economy.

But, it is a little frightening how consuming it all can become. At times I feel like I have opened Pandora's Box, or at least a small can of worms. I'm sure people talking to me have the same experience when they ask a theological question, but I have learned there is no such thing as a simple answer in home renovation.

Initially, I was excited to find out that a free kitchen sink would be included with my shiny new granite countertops if I used one company. Little did I realize until the next company came to visit that this was something to view with suspicion. If I was wise, I would see through this ruse, buy a better sink, and take the complimentary strainer set they had. If the other company is willing to give something away free, it can't really be good enough. Can it?

Prior to this adventure, I would have told you that stainless steel kitchen sinks were basically the same. Now I can expound with some authority about the different gauges of steel that are available and the sound muffling capacities of each. I can tell you that if you are looking to increase your resale value, you should never consider placing a sink in your granite countertop that is not an under-mount style. Frankly a sink that is divided equally into a 50/50 split is rather passé. A 60/40 or 70/30 is considered more modern. And, woe be unto the person who would try to install the same faucet fixture from their old laminate countertop onto the new granite. To quote a salesperson, "it simply isn't done."

There is also the slippery slope doctrine of home improvement. Everything you fix or replace merely serves to make everything else look terrible. You have to be careful, or the next thing you know you might decide down the whole house and start again. I had one very nice salesperson tell me my new countertops really warranted new lighting. Recessed lighting under the cabinets could make them shine like diamonds under spotlights in the evening.

I was tempted. Momentarily, I was under the impression that I was creating a modern art exhibit for the High Museum. I forgot that I was installing something to hold ubiquitous piles of clutter and old mail.

I will not bore you with the other areas of expertise I now have around hardwood flooring, renewable carpet fibers, popular paint colors, and the roman shade vs. plantation shutter debate. Trust me when I tell you it is all consuming. Fun, but enough to make my husband and children nod in quick agreement to any suggestion I have as they quickly run for the safety of the basement. My projects are coming to an end, and I look forward to relaxing and admiring my transformed space. I will be able to sigh with satisfaction and pat myself on the back for a job well done. It is time to relax, eat, drink,

and be merry.

Then Jesus told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then 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. And I will say to my soul, "'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God (Luke 12:16-21)."

Ouch. Is all this activity I've been engaged in merely the modern equivalent of building bigger barns? Perhaps. The thing that most convicted me was the rich man's focus on "I." The parable gives voice to conversation he has with himself that we would never utter out loud, but have probably had at some point. "I have a terrible problem. I have too much. What should I do with all of this? Build a bigger barn or load it all up into my trunk and take it to the Goodwill?"

Nowhere do we hear a note of gratitude for the abundant harvest. He does not offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God. And to hear the man talk, you'd think he lived alone on a desert island. More importantly, you sense his anxiety and distraction. He has a problem and he needs to fix it. There is no one to share his abundance with--just a barn building company to be researched and hired. It is impossible to imagine the work that would entail. He'd have to find a company with legally documented workers, sound ratings from the better business bureau, and one with a reasonable bid for such an important project. After he started building the bigger barn, he'd probably need to hire extra security to guard it, build a new fence around it, and find the latest in first century alarm systems.

After conquering this horrible burden of abundance, what can the man do but give himself a well earned vacation?

But God said to him, "'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you."

Foolish indeed. It is the height of foolishness to imagine that we ever have or will have that level of control. Do we really think our seasons of abundance are to be managed through sheer will? If it is all about us and up to us, of course we're exhausted. Of course we're consumed with controlling the external abundance, because we've fallen into idolatry.

We worship at the altar of consumerism where there will always be someone whispering in our ear that we do not have enough. We start to believe their rhetoric. We can't imagine how we have survived without the latest gadgetry. And if one thing doesn't relieve our anxiety, we must just need something else. We are trying to stuff a hole in our soul with an external piece of merchandise.

When we lose an internal posture of gratitude and connection with God, our external lives quickly are consumed with anxiety and high control needs. Is that any kind of life we really desire? And yet that is what that posture will demand of us.

This parable in the gospel is neatly sandwiched between two instances of Jesus telling the assembled crowds and disciples not to worry. But the man in the crowd can't hear an invitation to be free of worry. He is too mired in the dispute he is having with his brother over his inheritance. So in a seeming non sequitur he interrupts Jesus and asks him to settle the problem.

Jesus won't even engage his dispute. He knows that even if he were to fix that dispute, another one would inevitably arise. The dispute is only a symptom of the larger problem. The parable invites us to look beyond the dispute and see a much larger disordering of priorities. By claiming an attachment and responsibility for the abundance we receive, we put ourselves in the place of God. And it doesn't take long at the helm of omniscience to find ourselves drained of all life.

This is not a gospel text that signals the inherent evil of wealth. There are many things that can put us in a disordered relationship with our Creator. But I have to believe wealth is one that is particularly powerful, or it wouldn't be mentioned in the bible with such frequency. The more we have, the easier it can be to lose sight of our connection with the Body of Christ and the gratitude we need to live most abundantly.

The latest issue of Newsweek had an article by Lisa Miller entitled "No Atheists in Foxholes." She had interviewed economist Daniel Hungerman of the University of Notre Dame. He found that America's gross domestic product trends have an almost inverse relationship with church attendance. "When the business cycle goes up, religious attendance goes

down." And it's not simply a matter of folks thinking if they pray harder, than their individual financial situations will turn around. Those who are worse off are not more likely to go or responsible for the increase. It is overall church attendance that tends to shift rather than a change in individual behavior. Hungerman speculates "Maybe when the economy turns sour, no matter how much money you make, you get nervous and decide to go to church and talk with your buddies and get a sense of what's going on in your community. Or maybe people's desire for spiritual guidance is influenced by their perception of how the world's doing outside of themselves. Church attendance may not reflect our own circumstances but our own idea of how the world is doing beyond us (Newsweek, August 2, 2010)."

I wonder whether one gift of uncertain times is that we are reminded of our deep need of things beyond the material. It is an invitation to let God be God. It is a time to value the abundance of family and friends and our connections with community. This is true during the good times, but it is so much easier to give ourselves the credit. It is when things become difficult that we are consumed with our anxiety and shout out to Jesus for some direct intervention. Jesus hears us, but he also guides us away from the need for a quick fix. He invites us to a deeper belief and confidence in the abundance we already have in God's grace.

I think that's why after this parable Jesus comes back to the reminder he started with. Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? (Luke 12:21-26)"

Amen