

Luke 12:13-21

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” 16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 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. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 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?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Sermon: Fairness Fatigue

Several weeks ago, we visited the home of Mary and Martha. A tension arises, because one sister, Martha, is irritated that the other sister, Mary, isn’t doing her fair share of the chores. Or as one famous poem suggests: Martha believes that Mary is “sitting around on her salvation.”

“Tell her to do her fair share, Jesus,” Martha asks. Jesus gently reminds Martha that her tasks, though not unimportant, and certainly not unnecessary, are distracting her from better things: God’s presence.

In today's pericope, another sibling rivalry ensues. It's a common issue. Two brothers squabble over their inheritance. It seems that an older brother is reluctant to distribute an equitable portion to his younger brother. And the younger brother says to Jesus, "Tell my brother to give me my fair share."

Jesus will have none of it. "Friend," he says, "Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

In today's story, I believe Jesus is experiencing *fairness fatigue*.

Let's imagine the scene. Jesus is getting the crowd all ramped up, and he's just about ready to hit 'em with the good stuff: love and grace, and maybe he'll work in a few lines from the beatitudes, throw the crowd a classic parable, and see if it sticks. They'll be shoutin' amens and hallelujahs in no time!

Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus is ready to talk about God's in-breaking realm, an economy based on the idea of enough-ness. In God's world, love and grace are not exhaustible commodities. Jesus is explaining to the crowd that when we embrace the enough-ness of God's presence, we free ourselves from clinging to things that only have measurable value. When we embrace the enough-ness of God, we don't worry about what we don't have, or how much more our neighbors have, but rather, we acknowledge the abundance of God's presence. In God's economy, empathy and compassion are the derivatives of enough-ness. And when we care for one another, our needs are met organically.

But like I said, Jesus is experiencing fairness fatigue. In his presence, Israel does not acknowledge the abundance of spirit, but rather, sisters

squabble over chores, disciples jockey for seats of honor, church leaders agonize over policy, and brothers fight over their daddy's inheritance.

St. Augustine would say that Jesus is around too many people who cling to an earthly love, a love of things that distract them from God's presence, instead of clinging to a divine love, a love that sets their focus squarely on God.

But lucky for us Jesus is not impatient, nor does he teach theology or philosophy at an esteemed university. Jesus is not gonna offer them (or us!) a thirty-minute recap of Augustine's *The City of God*.

Here's what Jesus does do:

First, Jesus offers a stern warning to the crowd: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And then Jesus illustrates this point by doing what he does best. He tells a story:

Imagine a man. Some would call him a farmer, but that's not quite accurate. He knows how to farm, but he owns more land than the average farmer. He's a member of the planter aristocracy. His lands stretch as far as the eye can see and then some. If this man had lived in the Antebellum-era South, perhaps Margaret Mitchell would have written about him. He's got land. And wealth. And more resources than we can imagine.

And the farmer, er...vassal lord's lands produce abundantly. In other words, his crops don't just live, they thrive. He's got state-fair-winning produce along every row. He enjoys the kind of harvest that could fulfill the needs of a thousand families. He's interesting, so compelling that perhaps Dos Equis will create an advertising campaign about him. This man is a winner. Surely, God has blessed this man and all he touches.

One day, this man begins to survey his crops, and he thinks to himself: "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" In other words, what shall I do with all this abundance?

And this man gets to thinking, (and that should probably be our first hint of trouble). But anyway, he continues to look around his properties, and he notices that his barns sure do look awfully small. It's like having broom closets when you need walk-in closets. All this stuff isn't gonna store itself.

The man makes a few calculations in his head, and determines the rough amount of additional square footage he'll need. And as his eyes scan the horizon, he imagines the new barns that will dot the landscape, and he imagines the riches that will fill them. He imagines his workers trying to close the doors of his grain silos with their shoulders – there's so much abundance it's bursting at the seams. And he can envision a great hall filled with shiny, precious things, a monument to his every accomplishment.

And a rush of satisfaction sweeps over him, and he says to himself: "I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years – Look at all this you have accomplished. Look at all this that is yours. Now, relax, eat, drink, and be merry. Life's gonna be a party!"

But no sooner does the man finish this thought, than God says to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

And so our friend meets a tragic end: he’ll never get the chance to enjoy what he’s spent a lifetime accumulating.

At the close of the parable, Jesus tells the crowd: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich with God.”

So what does this mean? What’s Jesus trying to tell us?

Jesus is NOT scolding those who have retirement savings. Jesus is NOT frowning upon those who have deep freezers in their garage, or canned summer vegetables in their pantries, or children who deposit pennies in their piggy banks, or families who own life-insurance policies. Jesus is NOT condemning the wealthy, nor is Jesus frowning on those who enjoy luxury.

Here’s what Jesus is critiquing: Greed and apathy. Jesus frowns on those who hoard abundance. The rich farmer’s entire value system is inwardly-focused. He gathers his resources without gratitude for the God that provides such abundance, without acknowledgement of the sharecroppers he’s exploited to accumulate his wealth, and without any intention to use such resources to better the lives of his neighbors.

Remember Genesis? Specifically, the Joseph novella? Joseph stores up seven years of grain. He uses this surplus to steer Egypt through a famine. The rich farmer stores up grain like it’s a trophy.

The Hebrew prophets proclaim the year of Jubilee, that magical time when the harvest comes in, when debts are forgiven, when lands are restored, and when abundance is realized by all of God's people. The rich farmer would just assume abundance rather than realize the Jubilee. Nor will he ever acknowledge it is God, and not his own vanity that makes the land thrive.

The rich farmer relies on Caesar's economy. His worth is defined by accumulation. Caesar's economy tells him to acquire and acquire and acquire. And so the rich farmer only lives his life pursuing things. And in such pursuit, he is too busy to recognize the beloved community.

Millbrook Baptist Church, our challenge today is to avoid the temptation to let fairness consume us. We want our fair share: of nice things, of winning arguments, of last words, of acknowledgment for our hard work, of rest, of pay, of food, of drink, of power, of influence, of stuff, and on and on and on.

But if the pursuit of our fair share of treasures is all we seek, we will come up wanting. A better treasure awaits. God is in our midst. And God offers us a spirit that will fill us with love and compassion and empathy and joy. And should we choose to barter in such currency, God will offer us an economy big enough to meet all our needs.

It may not be fair, but it will most certainly be full. May it be so. Amen.