

ONLY A FOOL

What would a very blessed, extremely fortunate day look like to you? For me it would be a marvelously comfortable, 75 degree (with a little northeasterly breeze), beautiful summer afternoon. My sermon would be all written, and the Order of Worship finished and in our church secretary Holly's competent hands. There would be no chores around the house that needed to be done, and no pressing needs that had to be taken care of.

I would be relaxed and content, with another weekend day off still ahead of me. And I would think, how sweet it is, to have this kind of free time to savor. I would think about my family, all of us healthy, happy, well-housed and well-fed, sigh, and think to myself, "This is good. No, actually it's more than good. It's very good. God is in His heaven, and all is right in my world."

"Soul," I would say to myself, "you have ample goods laid up for many years—well, at least for the next day or two. So relax. Eat, drink, be merry. Penny, would you please bring me a glass of diet lemonade with a little ice in my glass; and then in a little while let's go on a stroll around the neighborhood. That way we won't have to bother to go to the gym today."

I hope that your summer so far has blessed you with many moments of contentment. Maybe you spent time at the beach or at your camp; or your heart swelled with pride as you watched your child or grandchild walk up and receive his or her High School diploma or a degree from college a month or so ago; or you had a relaxing time working in the garden or reading a good book out on the patio.

Perhaps you looked at your scorecard after a round of golf and were delighted to be only eleven over par; or you reviewed your IRA, 401-K or other investments and were proud and pleased about how much money you've been able to put away for your financial security. "Soul, relax; eat, drink, be merry."

This morning's parable from Luke's Gospel seems to begin with great contentment, but the truth is it's actually a serious dilemma. A rich man has a huge problem. He's been blessed with a spectacular harvest—a harvest so great, in fact, that he doesn't have a place large enough to store all his grain.

Doesn't your heart just bleed for him?

Jesus said, “He (the rich man) thought to himself, he deliberated within himself, he had a discussion with himself, saying, ‘What will I do with all this grain that I have harvested?’” Then, still talking to himself, the rich man said, “This is what I’m going to do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones; and I’ll store all my grain and my goods in them.” Problem solved. Worry over.

Now, tearing down what were surely perfectly good barns to build bigger barns seems like a very drastic action; but I think it highlights just how incredibly bountiful the rich man’s harvest actually was. This wasn’t a \$500 scratch lottery ticket-sized jackpot; it was more a Powerball or Mega-Millions-sized jackpot.

“And I will say to my soul (please notice that when someone is as rich as this man; when they’re this spectacularly successful, they don’t need anyone else to consult with. Their whole conversation is a discussion between me, myself and I); and I will say to my soul, ‘You have plenty of goods laid up for many years. So relax. Take it easy. Eat, drink, be merry.’”

I know this story first-hand. Do you? I’m pretty healthy. I have a job—and an excellent job, if I do say so myself. Penny and I are financially secure enough that we’re able to pay all of our bills on time (but please don’t let word of that get out to the members of Governing and Finance or else they might think it’s time for a pay cut!). We don’t carry a lot of debt. My marriage is strong. My daughter Alisha is bright, has a good head on her shoulders, and has a satisfying career as a speech therapist that has given her the opportunity to go to Uganda, Africa and use her skills to help others in need. Oh, and she just became engaged to her very nice, engineer boyfriend.

Yes, Fred, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Eat, drink, and be merry.

How’s your harvest? Do you have so much that you need bigger barns? More space to store your affluence? A bigger place to put it all? Whatever good stuff we’re blessed to have—be it our jobs, our investments and bank accounts, the pictures of our smiling and well-groomed kids, grandkids and great-grandkids lining the wall, the two cars and a two-bay garage with push-button garage door openers to park them in—is a comfort to us, isn’t it?

It indicates that, not only have we done a good job of living, but we’ve managed to construct a kind of protective fence around us as insurance against life’s uncertainties and its ups and downs—a fence that leads us to say, even while others suffer, go hungry and are in dire need, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

This parable Jesus told is often called *The Parable of the Rich Fool*; but I’m

not sure Jesus would have given it that title. Remember how our Lord began the story by talking, not about the foolish man, but about the land and its bounty. “The ground (the land) of a rich man produced abundantly.” So the first thing Jesus mentioned in his parable was a miraculous, barn-bursting harvest that came, not from the rich man’s own talent or his green thumb, but from “the ground;” that is, from God, as a pure gift of grace. And that’s where we should focus our attention and understanding about this story.

I think the rich man made his first mistake by not recognizing and acknowledging God’s part in the incredibly fruitful harvest he’s so pleased and proud of. We don’t hear one word of gratitude or appreciation from him for this unasked for, unearned blessing.

And a second mistake the rich man made was to consider his blessing to be a burden, a headache. The gift, as wonderful as it was, became a problem. What in the world am I going to do with this huge abundance of grain? Where am I going to put it all? Interestingly, it seems the thought never occurred to him that he could give a portion of it away to the poor and hungry people around him. Or, maybe he did consider that option at some point, but ultimately rejected it out of hand.

“Okay,” he finally said, “this is what I’m going to do. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I can store all my grain, my goods. Today the man would probably say, “I know what I’ll do! I’ll rent a storage bin—the biggest one available—at that *Store-It-Yourself* place a few miles from here; then I can stockpile all my grain and the piles of excess stuff I don’t have room for in my house—stuff that, if the truth be told, I don’t really need and I’m not even sure that I want.” “And then I will say to my soul, ‘Relax, you have ample goods laid up for many years. So eat, drink, be merry.’”

But at the very end of the parable, another voice intrudes into the story. The voice of God.

Now, let’s be clear. This isn’t a judgmental voice. God doesn’t accuse the rich man of injustice, or immorality, or even greed. God doesn’t call him a sinner. God simply says to him, “You fool!” Think about that for a moment. A man whom our world would admire and call wise, fortunate and far-sighted—a man who wants to save his money and work toward financial security so he can relax and enjoy the fruits of his labor—God calls that person a fool.

What he’s doing doesn’t seem foolish to me and probably 99.4 percent of the other 7 billion-plus people on this planet. He was a hard and honest worker who simply wanted to get off the hamster wheel he’d been running on for so long and enjoy life for a change. That’s all.

So, why does God call the rich man a fool?

Because, says God, “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared”—you know, that huge harvest you’re so happy about of and the bigger barns you want to build—“whose will they be?” In other words, “Buddy, I got news for you. You know the plans you have for a winter home in the Bahamas and a new Mercedes Benz sport car? Sorry, but you’re not going to live long enough to see those things happen.”

And that’s the end of the story. Jesus’ parable concludes with an unanticipated message and a somber question that just hangs there, begging to be contemplated and reflected on. “This very night your life is being demanded of you,” God says. “So, tell me, who’s going to get all your stuff, because you certainly won’t be taking it with you.”

Mortality has a way of messing up our best laid plans, doesn’t it?

The late theologian Karl Barth used to say that one day, a procession of people will travel to a cemetery, say some words over a grave, and then all of them will disperse and return home—all of them, that is, except you. And what then? Who will your things belong to after that?

In doing some research for this sermon, I read that, in this parable of Jesus, the Greek translation literally says, “Fool, this very night they shall demand your life.”

And who is “they”?

Well, the “they” isn’t a person or persons, but things! “They” are the things the rich man has accumulated. “They” is all the grain, all the great possessions, the abundance of wealth the rich man was so excited to have and worried so much about what to do with. The rich man was making plans to manage and take control of his miraculous surplus of riches; but the reality was, his riches were managing and taking control of him.

Do you grasp the great irony Jesus was trying to get across? The rich man believed he owned many things, enough wealth and prosperity to make his life better and easier, only to discover too late that those things actually owned him.

And isn’t that the case with many people today? They think they have all these material goods and luxuries, when in reality those things have them. Their possessions dictate to them. They control their owners. People live for their worldly stuff, and in some cases they actually die for their worldly stuff.

What’s wrong with that picture? And who’s really in control?

There’s something else, something very important about this parable that I want to point out to you, because it’s so often overlooked or misunderstood.

And that is, God isn't punishing the rich man here. If there's any punishment for the rich man in Jesus' story, it's a result of his own foolish, misguided and short-sighted priorities. It's the result of him forgetting a basic truth about the human animal. And that is, we human beings are mortal. Our lives here on earth are temporary and fleeting. We all know this, but don't we still tend to plan our lives as though they're going to go on forever, or at least continue for a very long time?

Well, God willing, we will be around for years to come. But Jesus warned us to balance that hope of a long, healthy life with the realistic acknowledgement that there are no guarantees; and one day, a group of people is going to return home from the cemetery; but not me, and not you. And what then? Will we look foolish in God's eyes by placing too much importance in the things of this world; by forgetting that God gave us our lives here on earth to enjoy, but it's a limited time offer.

So, it's time for a reality check. It's time to reflect and ask ourselves, what are the highest, most important priorities in our life. Is it our possessions (and the more we have the better)? Is it those wonderful worldly things that we can't take with us when we're gone? And while we're pondering that, let's also ask ourselves, as disciples of Jesus, do we see a connection between our blessings and resources, and our obligations to God and our neighbor?

In other words, do we realize that the more blessings we're given, the greater the responsibility God puts on us to share those blessings with those in need?

I will end my message this morning with the prayer that we will make the most of the blessings of life God has given us. But may we not allow our worldly possessions to possess us. Because one day, when, as my father likes to say, "The Big Guy upstairs puts the call in to us," we're going to have to answer that call. And all the material things we've worked so hard to acquire, have invested so much time, energy and importance in and think are so important, will be left behind.

We won't be able to take any of it with us. And only a fool would think otherwise. Amen.