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Luke 12:13-21

“Foolishness”

Jesus says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

In preparing this sermon over the week, I read an essay on how to preach prickly texts, what to do when the Bible lays in your hands the kind of stuff that may make us squirm a little bit. For example, if you are a young preacher about to tackle Jesus’ challenging words on wealth and abundance in a place like Duke Chapel. I’m working my way through this essay, and the author is saying, now you want to remind the folks out there in the pews that these aren’t some crazy ideas that you came up with on your own; they are Jesus’ words. So you hold out the biblical text in front of you as a deflection shield, and you peer around it, and you say now this isn’t me talking, this is Jesus talking. I think to myself as I go through the paper, gosh, this is great stuff, I’m going to use this on Sunday morning, and I finish the essay and it says, “by William H. Willimon.” And I thought, “didn’t he used to work here?”

Some of you may have heard the story that James Clelland, the former Dean of the Chapel here at Duke loved to tell, that when he was a young preacher, he was paid the then astounding sum of three hundred dollars for preaching one sermon. On a visit to his Calvinist mother in the highlands of Scotland, he proudly told her of his good fortune. Three hundred dollars just for one sermon! Clelland’s mother replied, “Oh son, the price has gone up, there was a time when, to betray our Lord, they only had to pay Judas thirty pieces of silver.”

In the gospel appointed for us this morning, Jesus has once again locked his teeth down on the subject he discusses the most in Luke’s gospel: material possession. A man comes up to Jesus and tries to bait him into a family squabble about money. The father has died, and, as if to prove that first century Palestine isn’t that different from 21st century Durham, a fight has broken out among the children. One brother says to Jesus force my brother to divide the inheritance with me. Jesus knows better to get in the middle of this scrum, in response he says: “be on your guard against all kinds of greed. For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And then Jesus goes on to tell the story of the rich fool. A farmer has had a tremendous year. Things have broken his way, enough rain and sun, no parasites or disease found their way into his crops, the fertilizer worked well enough, his hired hands did their jobs, and the result is abundance, more produce than he can possibly manage. His is a life of abundant possession, overflowing with excess, so much so that he cannot hold it all. And so he tears down his old barns and builds bigger ones, stuffing them to the roof with his windfall, then the rich man sits back and admires all that he has. He says to his soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. The good life has come. Relax, eat, drink, be merry. And God looks at all of this and says, “you are a fool.”

I remember what Mark Twain said about the Bible, it’s not the parts that I don’t understand that bother me, but the parts that I do understand. Throughout the gospels

perhaps the subject that Jesus has more to say about than anything else is our addiction, our love, our abuse, our idolatry of money and material possession. This rich fool has filled his silos to the top; there is no room for anything else. But his silos and barns aren't the only things that are full. His soul, which he believes he controls, is also full. The soul that God created, stamped with God's image, has been filled with the merry life of possession and money. In other words, there is no room in his soul, in his life for God. He has wrapped his grubby hands about possession, money, security. There is no room for God in those clenched fists, in that soul of his that has clamped down on the idol of abundant possession, there is no space for God. And God says, "he's a fool."

When describing Scrooge, Charles Dickens said this: "Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scarping, clutching, covetousness old sinner!" Jesus, far less eloquently than Dickens, might have just said, Scrooge, "he's a fool."

In describing that tight-fisted scrooge mentality, Frederick Buechner says of us: "A clenched fist can do many things. It can hammer a nail. It can grasp on and hold tight. A fist can be used as a weapon to lash out. But the one thing a clenched fist cannot do, is reach out and receive."

Christianity has claimed greed has one of the great sins. Because at its root, greed is idolatry, seeking to fill our lives with everything except God. When our lives become like a clenched fist, grasping on to our possessions, being filled with the world around us, there is no emptiness, there is no room for us to reach out and receive God. Instead, we need some emptiness in us, a void where God can come in.

This is why through so much of the Christian tradition, and throughout so much of scripture, Jesus goes head to head with money, money, that great idol of our existence. When does it happen, that slippery moment in our lives, when our passion for doing good, for seeking justice and serving others sells out for a fat pay-check, 60 hours a week behind a desk, a fine pension and a leisurely retirement. We hear this text and might think, surely Jesus must not be suggesting that we are the rich fools, after all, we live in America, and in America there is always the excuse that we know plenty of folks who are richer than we are. Jesus must be speaking to them.

We need faithful friends in our lives who, like this scripture, have the guts to question our foolishness. I remember the long-time friend who loved me enough to ask that hard question when contemplating a career change: is this a sign of God's call in your life to this place? Or does the sign in your soul at the moment say "sold out to the highest bidder." And perhaps these are the question we should all wrestle with, deep down in our souls. We should say to our soul, soul, to whom do we belong? Do our lives resemble an open palm or a clenched fist? With what is our soul filled? Does it belong to its rightful owner, the one who crafted us, whose image is stamped in our very being? Or, does our soul look more akin to the rich fool in Jesus' parable, the rich fool who believes he has ownership of his soul and fills it with possessions and abundance that he sees as the good life.

It is one of God's great gifts that throughout history the church has been a friend to ask us hard questions, to hold up a mirror for us, shining light into our souls. Church is the only place we have hope of getting the right answer. In our culture that is so saturated by consumerism, most of us feel more at home in a department store than we do at church. For us in America SouthPointe Mall is our natural habitat; church is a foreign

landscape with a different set of practices and rituals. But we desperately need the church, to tell us the truth about our lives, to remind us to whom our soul belongs. TS Elliot said: “Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws? She tells them of Life and Death, and of all they would forget. She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft. She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.”

All week long we are out there in the marketplace beyond this gothic stone, competing, grabbing, producing. In our society of abundance, we are trained by the air we breathe to consume, we are known in the dominant economic language of the age as consumers, rather than human beings. Our desires betray us. Our souls demand to be filled and so we grub about, grabbing, seeking, buying, anything to fill the emptiness, confused over what we want, not knowing what we truly need. Advertisers are happy to help us out; they prey upon our desires. I had never heard of a DVD player, and certainly didn't realize I needed one, until Sony told me I did, to replace the Sony VCR I bought three years ago, that I also needed. CS Lewis says that we live in a world where all the price tags have switched around. The stuff that has little value at all costs thousands and thousands of dollars, and what we truly desire, what has great value, friendship, love, faithfulness, doesn't cost any money at all.

Sunday after Sunday we stumble out of the marketplace chaos and into the church's arms for an hour or so, and she holds us tight and through anthems, prayers, and scripture says to us you're not a consumer, you're not a producer, you are a child of God and your soul belongs to me. And then she says to us, because I love you so much, let's take up some money, I want a tithe, at least ten percent of what you've got; it's for your own good. So we take up an offering, not because God needs the money, though certainly there is much good that could be done if we were a bit more generous. No the church teaches us to tithe, not because God needs it, but because we do. Our tithe is a last defense against a world bent on turning us into mere consumers; a tithe says to the idols of consumption and material abundance, you may own 90% of me, but with this ten percent I draw the line somewhere, I create some space in my life for God to get in. With our tithe we open our cluttered souls just a crack and say to Madison Avenue, you don't have me yet, I will give at least a fraction of my life to God.

The time in worship here at Duke Chapel I love the most is not when our choir sings their glorious anthems, though I would never admit that to them. It's not when Dr. Arcus makes the organ soar to the heavens and we process in behind the lifted cross. No, I love those weeks when we have Holy Communion, and all of us who hold on tight to so much stuff in our lives come forward with nothing to do but open our empty hands, stretch them out, and allow them to be filled with the Body and Blood of Christ.

Just before his death, Jesus had a meal with his closest friends in the upper room. We know it as the last supper. He knew what was happening. “Behold the hand of him who betrays me is upon the table with me,” said Jesus to his disciples who had gathered around the table. When we think of that night, with the salvation of the world at hand, it may give us great comfort to know that Judas was there, in the midst of them all, a disciple like the rest of us. He had heard Jesus' preaching about the Kingdom of God, the lilies in the field, the parable of the rich fool. Right in the thick of things, there is Judas our brother, who had professed, like us, to follow Jesus – then threw it all away for a fistful of coins.

The next day, Friday, our brother Judas nailed Jesus to a cross with those coins. And as our Lord hung there on that cross, hands wide open to the world, with his dying words Jesus simply said, “father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Forgive them, even fools like them.” Amen.

*I am indebted to William H. Willimon’s writing on the sin of greed for much of the form of this sermon.