

How Big?

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

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I will pull down my barns and build larger ones,
and there I will store all my grain and my goods. (Luke 12:18)

Last week I saw an advanced screening of a new movie called *Equity*. The film was written, directed, produced, and financed by women and the story centers on three talented, tenacious, ambitious women. In other words, it was well worth seeing! As the title hints, the movie is about Wall Street and the effect it has on behavior. The premise of the movie was less to condemn the excesses of Wall Street than to offer three case studies of how different individuals respond to the siren song of money, power, and fame. It does not end with harps playing miracle music or a modern-day Joan of Arc emerging from the wreckage of others' immorality. Each of them stumbles in their own way and no one emerges unscathed from an environment that preaches there are only winners and losers; an environment that measures success and worth only by keeping score of who wins the most deals and who gets paid the most money.

Then right on cue the lectionary serves up a parable about wealth, greed, giving and the purpose of life. To that we might add a pinch of sibling rivalry and of course anxiety. Jesus doesn't quite say empty the barn and follow me but we need to be clear-eyed about the meaning of this parable for our time. In our sophisticated economy with extended life expectancy, inadequate 401-Ks and multiple generations no longer living under one roof, providing for ourselves is more important and more fraught than ever. We might ask ourselves does saving for a future unknown need constitute hoarding especially when there is immediate need in our community and beyond? Where is the line between hoarding and keeping prudent reserves so as not to be a burden on others as we get older? The lawyer in Jesus' audience is dying to ask, how big a barn can I build and still be rich toward God? Please don't misunderstand me; I am not joining the chorus of those who preach a

prosperity Gospel where God wants all his people to be rich – most especially pastors! By the same token I don't believe God desires us to suffer in the Eden God created for humankind.

The Parable of the Rich Fool is the story of an individual who possessed a plot of land with unusually fertile soil. We don't know how he acquired the

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property or how diligently he cultivated it. But that is not what the story is about. It is about thinking beyond ourselves and asking the question, "How much". Are we to be sacrificial in our lifestyle and how would we even define that? Is taking two vacations in one year over the top? Is driving a luxury car? What about our children? They are likely to be burdened with debt by the time they are 30; if we are able do we try to maintain a separate barn for them? Jesus is not as transparent, to use the word of the day, as we might like.

Equity was a bit of a flashback for me triggering uneasy feelings of how it was all served up as a game that relied on power and control of others. The game was taken very seriously and any suggestion that certain values had gotten warped were not taken kindly. Winning the game had little to do with the long-term needs of the client, and almost nothing to do with the development of the employee or the greater good of society. It was winning the game and indulging in the bling of success. Remember all those great quotes from the original

Wall Street movie? "Greed is good. Anything worth doing is worth doing for money. If you need a friend by a dog. It's all about the bucks, the rest is conversation. The problem with money is it makes you do things you don't want to do." This is the extreme end of what Jesus cautions against.

How are we to understand this agrarian Middle Eastern parable, in a way that is relevant in our suburban, American lives? The central figure has abundance – it really doesn't matter whether, wheat, barley, gold or drachma. The point Jesus makes is the rich man wants it all. It seems he has no thought about others or even that others might be in need. William Barclay the Scottish preacher and theologian says "There is no other parable which is so full of the words, I, me, my and mine. The rich fool was *aggressively* self-centered." He provides this succinct example of self-centered; feel free to change the name to fit someone you may know or have heard about. Barclay reports, "It was said of a self-centered young lady, 'Edith lived in a little world, bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith.' Barclay cites another famous criticism of a self-centered person, 'There is too much ego in his cosmos.' When this man had a superfluity of goods the one thing that never entered his head was to give any away. His whole attitude was the very reverse of Christianity. Instead of denying himself he aggressively affirmed himself; instead of finding his happiness in giving he tried to conserve it by keeping.

Our consideration need not be limited to individuals. At the end of last year American corporations had a record \$1.8 trillion in cash reserves domestically and an estimated \$2 trillion offshore. Rather than reinvest that money in the business, including its employees, corporations are much more likely to buy back stock to bolster its share price. And yet anytime the subject of a living wage is raised the Chamber of Commerce and their other lobbyists predict a collapse in corporate profits. And I suppose we should remember that the endowment of this church is roughly \$240,000 and hasn't been drawn down for at least five or six years. How much of a rainy day fund does the church need? Are there needs in the community that we are called to address? I wonder

if anyone else is thinking of the Parable of the Talents and the scolding received by the one who buried his single talent in fear?

Jesus tells the Parable of the Rich Fool in response to a request that he help settle a dispute over inheritance. I find these family feuds over money especially painful – the bigger the barn the bigger the row. I was in the hardware store a few weeks ago and listened to a description of a large house in Pelham that had not been occupied for two decades. I was not familiar with the house but the proximate address indicated it was noteworthy even for Pelham Manor. Apparently there had been such unyielding disagreement between the siblings as to what to do with the property and its contents that they locked the doors and did nothing. It seems something changed and this person was reporting on the contents of the house. There were bills on the desk with an old pen and stamps, magazines from the 90s on the coffee table, and vaguely familiar bottles of old shampoo in the bathroom. The estate had paid Pelham real estate taxes on an empty house for 20 years because family members could not agree on what to do. It is hard to imagine what could have motivated such obstinance but I'm inclined to believe that money was at the bottom of it.

But here's the thing. The value of our assets is changing all the time – sometimes radically. In the last 10 years, gold has fluctuated in price from a low of \$560 to a high of \$1,900. Two months after President Obama was inaugurated, the stock market continued its free-fall bottoming out below 6,600. On Friday it closed at 18,432. Unfortunately, my house is still worth 20% less than what I paid for it and we had traded a bigger barn for a smaller barn! And as for the farmer it is almost certain that a large percentage of that crop spoiled before anyone could use it. In the end it had to be thrown away, its value less than zero.

Hoarding is no longer limited to the haves. Have you noticed that as a culture we have become rather extraordinary savers? It seems we save nearly everything except our money! I would venture to guess that every one of us lives less than 5 miles

from a self-storage unit and that more than a handful of us rent space in one. Our attics are full of boxes that haven't seen the light of day for years – who knows, there may be something we need someday or perhaps it'll be worth thousands on Antiques Roadshow! We have closets full of clothes that we can't bear to part with even though they just don't look the same 10 pounds later! Next year! When we place disproportionate value – sentimental or otherwise – on the "stuff" of life we should examine what else may be going on that we are not in touch with.

Writing in *Feasting on the Gospels* (Luke Vol. II, p.10-11) Richard Floyd points to anxiety as the reason we build bigger barns. He reminds us that Paul Tillich, the ground breaking Christian existential philosopher and Lutheran pastor, regarded anxiety as "the threat of nonbeing". For the three protagonists in *Equity* the threat of nonbeing was overcome by being a rainmaker; someone highly valued for making a lot of money for the corporation and consequently for themselves. When they see the stark reality that they are only valued as highly as their most recent deal the anxiety, the threat of nonbeing is suffocating. Feelings of nonbeing often increase as we get older and lose family and friends. We feel isolated and cling to objects that remind us of happier times. But we can get over-attached and they create barriers separating us from God; we lose our richness toward God.

Perhaps that is the connection to our reading from Ecclesiastes. Let me re-read what Kerstin read so beautifully before: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind." The writer goes on to say, "There is nothing new under the sun." A fairly grim assessment but one I imagine more than one of us has wrestled with. Ultimately it seems to say that our barns are little more than vanity and chasing after the wind. We can never be

sure despite our best efforts whether we have made a difference in the world. We cannot know if words spoken or kindnesses extended have helped to inspire hope or see the path forward more clearly. We need more than barns packed to the rafters or even wisdom to be rich toward God. We need to think beyond ourselves and even beyond those in our immediate tribe. And it's not like we can say, well I did this one good deed that is good enough, I can relax and be merry. It is not about checking boxes to meet a requirement. In the end it is about your attitude to your neighbor; how you use the blessings you have been given

Perhaps Paul provides a useful epilogue to this movie/parable review in the letter addressed to the Colossians. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ."

May you always be rich toward God.

Amen