

“Thy Will Be Done”

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
Psalm 49:1-12 and Luke 12:13-21
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Earlier in chapter 12 of Luke’s gospel, the crowd is described as in the thousands, so big that the people are trampling on each other, and it is out of this crowd, almost like a heckler at a speech, that one voice raises loud enough to be heard by Jesus, As it says in verse 13 that Dave just read: “Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’”

You might think that Jesus had just finished talking with the crowds about inheritance division, or family relationships, maybe justice, something like that, given what this man shouts, but no. Jesus just finished talking about hypocrisy, whispers in the dark that will be brought to light, that there are worse things to fear than those who can kill your body.

The man in the crowd wasn’t listening. He isn’t present in real time, not open to what Jesus is saying, he doesn’t respond to something Jesus said. He arrives with a fixed mindset and he has an agenda. The reason he is there in the crowd before Jesus is not to be challenged, transformed, or disciplined, but to get something he wants.

Even if what he wants seems not to be a bad thing – a divided inheritance among brothers sounds fair to our modern ears – his approach is to use Jesus to further an end he already decided upon. *“tell my brother”*

Which is why the parable Jesus tells in response is so brilliant. What the rich man is doing in the parable also sounds reasonable to our modern ears – he has worked hard and has wealth from it, and now he is looking to save for retirement, for the day when he can eat, drink and be merry – an idiom we still say today not from Shakespeare - Luke 12! Aren’t retirement funds the modern capitalist equivalent of an “ample good laid up for many years” as verse 19 puts it? Reasonable, maybe moving towards necessary, in the economic system of today.

Perhaps same for the man building an extra barn, in the economic system of his day.

The man's initial request about inheritance might seem fair, reasonable and the building of a bigger barn might seem reasonable, necessary, but in neither case, is anyone asking Jesus what he thinks, nor God for that matter. The rich fool, as he is called, in the parable has just as much a fixed mindset set on his own agenda as the man from the crowd. Just as closed off from being challenged, transformed or disciplined His every word is directed to himself, and the three verses that take us inside this man's thought process and self-talk are almost comedic:

In verse 17: he thinks to himself – what should I do, I have no place to store my crops. Himself, I, I, my. Verse 18, he says – implied, to himself, I will do this: I will put down my barns, build larger ones, I will store all my grains and my goods.” I, I, my, I, my, my. Verse 19: I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample good laid up for years, relax, eat, drink and be merry. I my, soul, soul, you – the one “you” here is actually him addressing himself again, this time in the second person. This man thinks to himself about a problem, talks to himself about it, makes a plan with himself to solve it, then congratulates himself on his plan.
Way to go you!

He is either unaware of God's absolute proximity to him during all this, or he is aware but thinks what he does with his own grain and goods is no business to God. He very much knows what he wants to do and acts from the force of his own will. That God is there, listening to his every word, perhaps waiting to be asked about, “God, what is “thy will be done” with this amount of extra grain?” doesn't dawn on this man until he is jarred to awareness by being called a fool, and then by the shock that his life is ending that very night.

The parable begins and ends with Jesus sharing clear words about what is at stake, why he tells a story that ends with the man's death, and it is because people were missing what “life” means. Beware, be on guard, against all kinds of greed for life is not about possessions, and God's will includes your approach to wealth, money, treasure, for riches be stored up toward God, not treasures for oneself.

In Bible Study, Rachel was mentioning the 1980s bumper sticker, the one who dies with the most toys wins, - you can buy the 1980s vintage version on ebay for

\$11.00 today (still available as of 8.3.22 - <https://www.ebay.com/itm/115457963976>) Jesus words here are the exact opposite of that sentiment. Or maybe Psalm 49 better offers the exact opposite phrase, “mortals cannot abide in their pomp.” I checked and “mortals cannot abide in their pomp” is not yet a bumper sticker, but I kind of want to make one. Mortals cannot abide – they cannot dwell, find life, in their pomp. Richness toward God is the purpose, knowing what “life” consists of, and what it does not - is the goal.

And the reason Jesus is pushing us to know what life looks like defining it as richness towards God, is precisely why he so strongly warns the man from the crowd to Beware – in the Greek it is stronger than take care – and to be on guard, and why the man in the parable is called a fool. Assessing what seems fair, or reasonable, even necessary, when it comes to our relationship with wealth, is such a wilderness terrain that we are so very likely to wander off the path of Jesus and follow the ways of greed, selfish storing, equating possessions with identity, which are all forms of idolatry.

The writer G.K Chesterton describes the need to beware and on guard like this: “There is one thing that Christ and all the Christian saints have said with a sort of savage monotony. They have said simply that to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck.” *Orthodoxy* by Chesterton
<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1807543-orthodoxy?page=3>

I wonder if that is because our attitudes and actions regarding wealth try to keep God at arm’s length with locked elbows. While we might inquire of God’s will when it comes to jobs, moves, relationships, big life decisions, we often see our choices about money as existing in their own system over which we have little control and therefore we give little control of it to God.

The priest Kathryn Greene McCreight puts it very starkly like this: “We are unwittingly entangled in an enormous web that pulls our comforts from the backs of other people’s children.” *Christian Century* article “Living by the Word” by Kathryn Greene-McCreight 5/29/07 That line came after a paragraph about children who mine our cell phone components, but went on to describe the massive wealth disparity in our country and world.

Maybe we make our own decisions, much like the man in the parable, and then hope that God helps our decisions, or blesses our choices, “I’m going to do this God, please help it work out” which is very different than involving God in them in the first place, different than being opened to challenge, transformation, and discipleship in this huge part of our lives. I wonder if it would have made a difference if the man in the crowd said to Jesus “teacher, there is a situation with my brother that is hard right now, and here is how I am seeing it, but I really want to know how you do.” Or if the rich man had addressed God by his side and said, “I am blessed with abundant land, more grain than I can use or store. I am worried about preparing for an unknowable future, but I am also worried I will think I need to keep more than I do, especially when some don’t have enough grain now. I really want to know what you think.”

Now we know that the questions we are the least likely to ask are those we don’t actually want to know the answer to, or maybe more accurately, the ones where we really, really don’t want to follow the answer we think we will get. That long sentence probably sums up my prayer life around money. College looms for us so large that retirement seems on a far away hill, So we consider all the time how much we save and how much we give away, often more like the man in the parable, thinking to ourselves and talking to ourselves and making plans ourselves, and less like asking God for thy will be done in this as in everything, which is what seeking richness toward God as the absolute first priority would look like. Being open to being challenged, transformed and disciplined in every part of our life, every day.

It could also be that discerning God’s will is hard, and we are out of practice. Because it is a practice, a habit, like any other, where the more we do it, ask in prayer, or while reading scripture, or while talking to others in Christian community: prayer, word, being disciplined together, the more connected we feel to God’s will.

The Dutch painter Rembrandt did an early painting on the parable of the Rich Fool,



where a richly dressed man sits alone at a table in a room, a sea of scrolls and papers piling higher than the man occupy every other chair at the table, and the piles are angled precariously, they look like at any moment they will fall on top of him. The man is holding a coin up to a candle flame, the coin's reflection back on his face is the only light source on the canvas. The man's gaze is fixed upon the coin, in a hollow stare, like it is consuming him. The way the coin seems to pull the man's focus fits so well with the parable, but my favorite part is what the piles on the chairs indicate: there is no other person who would sit in those chairs at this man's table. He has filled them instead with accounts of his wealth.

It is true that the rich fool didn't know God was a listening partner in his self-talk, it is also true that the man was very much alone in the story, and he would die that very night alone. Because being rich towards God, seeking life and its greatest purpose, asking God's will be done, will always point us to something bigger than the self, maybe that is the foundational meaning of God's will, that it will always be bigger than me and what I want, bigger than a man counting money alone at a table.

As Kate Bowler writes, when we ask God to be a part of something, it is like opening the aperture on a camera, (didn't quote this because can't find exact reference, but if you google "Kate Bowler" and "aperture" you will see it as a theme in her writing) or in today's world, maybe turning my cell phone to panorama setting— you always get a wider view than you did at first, you will see people and ways you can connect with their lives and their needs that you didn't know were right outside your frame. And the more open our view, the less we keep and the more we give.