

**St. Timothy's Lutheran Church**  
**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**

**February 4, 2018**  
**Luke 12:13 – 21**

### **Giving Up Greed**

It was a dream, but it seemed as real as this moment. He had just settled into his easy chair to relax. And suddenly God was there with him. All around him were the signs of his comfortable life – “evidences of God’s blessing,” he liked to call them.

And then God was there with him. He was just about to express his gratitude to God for all the nice things around him, when God asked him a startling question: “Which of the things you possess would you give me, if I asked you for it?” He immediately tensed. What did God have in mind? But he looked around and quickly found many things he would be happy enough to do without, if God wanted them. He set them out in the middle of his living room. He was impressed with how many he found so quickly.

He looked expectantly in God’s direction. But God seemed still to be waiting. *OK, he thought, I can find more things I would be willing to relinquish, if God were to demand them of me.* The pile in his living room grew; the shelves and corners of his room began to look bare. He found more and more things that he would be willing to do without, if necessary. But God still waited. After a while, he found it to be more and more difficult. He thought carefully about each object. *Would I really be willing to do without this?* And God waited.

He held his last treasure in his hand and struggled. *Could I really give this up,* he wondered? In the end, he did not throw it on the pile. What he did instead was sneak it quickly under several other items, well out of sight, and hoped God hadn’t noticed.

“There you are, God,” he said as triumphantly. “Take whatever you want!” The moment of truth had arrived. He hoped, of course, that God would smile at him and say, “Thanks. You passed the test with flying colors. I just wanted to know if you were willing. You can keep your things.” But what if God would instead say, “Well done. I hoped you would be willing to give it all up. I’ll take it then.”?

Well, God did neither. Instead God came nearer and carefully examined the pile he had made. God walked around the pile and stopped right near the very last treasure he had carefully hid, reached out slowly, and said, “I think I will take only *that!*” And just as God was about to take hold of the last piece he had carefully sneaked into the pile, he cried out in his dream: “No, Lord, you really can have everything, just please not *that.*” And then God answered, “My child, I don’t want to take everything away from you. I only want *that.* I only want that which you want to withhold from me. Everything else belongs to me already.”<sup>1</sup>

He awoke, shaken by the dream. And it was not much later, he says, that the Lord took that one thing of which he did not want to let go.

I had been fixed on his every word and wondered what *it* was. Was *it* a possession? Was *it* a person? Was *it* a hope or a dream? I wasn’t told what *it* was, and perhaps that was the point. That was the point, because *I* have many “its” in my life, and perhaps so do you.

In our Gospel text this morning, we enter a conversation midstream. A large crowd has gathered. The crowd has begun to grow so that people are getting

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Tim Geddert, 9/20/2016.

trampled upon. Jesus speaks to the crowd, warning them of the Pharisees, telling them to fear God, and not humans.

A man speaks up from the crowd. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (Lk 12:13b). Since Jesus is a teacher and has studied the Law of Moses, he is a legal expert. He, like other teachers, may be called upon to settle such disputes.<sup>2</sup> The man’s request for Jesus’ help is therefore *not* out of place. The man wants justice, and Jesus is in a position to offer it.

Because of his request and what would be normal in first century Near Eastern culture, we know that the man is a younger brother. His father apparently died without writing a will, so the inheritance will not be divided until his older brother agrees.<sup>3</sup> The man wants Jesus to force the issue with his brother so that he can receive his due. Without Jesus’ help, he may not receive an inheritance.

Jesus is acutely aware that this man is concerned about his future security and that he is *not* so concerned about the relationship with his brother. Instead of requesting that Jesus help them reconcile because their father’s inheritance has caused division, he *demand*s that Jesus give *him* his due.

My best friend’s dad is a lawyer. When I was in high school, I asked him about his prestigious work as a lawyer. I remember what he told me, nearly 17 years later. He told me that his work is in family law. His work is with clients to establish wills and trusts, and then to aid in the distribution of possessions. He sighed as he told me that what should be a time to grieve and care for one’s family is often a time of

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 300.

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, 300.

arguing over who will get what. He once worked with a family who fought over a family heirloom *Bible*.

Unlike my friend's father, Jesus refuses to give legal counsel to this man. He instead tells the crowd, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk 12:15).

Jesus tells them a parable. "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'" (Lk 12:16 - 19).

The man is rich. He is rich *and* his crops produce an abundance of grain. Likely, since *his* crops do well, his *neighbors'* crops do well too. But the man does not want to flood the market, lowering the price of the crop. He is well off enough that he does not need to profit from this year's production. He can store up his crop and sell when he chooses to.

To this man, we might say, "Well done! What a savvy business decision you've made! But this is *not* Jesus' response.

In verses 17 - 19, Jesus says that the man thinks to himself. The man discusses *with himself* what he ought to do with his bumper crop. In first-century Near Eastern culture, this was not normal procedure. When decisions needed to be made, many friends and family and other townsfolk would be brought into the conversation. They would decide as a *community*, what to do with such things as

bumper crops. But this man thinks to *himself* about what he ought to do with his bumper crop. He may not have any friends, nor does he want the counsel of any. He decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones and take life easy – eat, drink, and be merry. After his neighbors' crops are sold and there is a famine in the land, he will jack up the price of his crops, making his neighbors indebted to him. “[He] will...secure his economic power and position of status in the village as others are made more and more dependent on him.”<sup>4</sup>

“But God [says] to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’” (Lk 12:20). God calls this savvy businessman a fool! His life will be demanded of him, and there is *no one* to inherit his possessions. This man's life may be taken by God, or perhaps by the peasants from this man's community who will revolt and kill him because he has decided his well-being is more important than his neighbors'. Either way, the man's life will be taken, and all of his effort to store up his possessions will have been worthless. The man fails to see that what he has, even his life, is a gift from God.

Our natural inclination is to be greedy. One of the saddest, early moments in a child's life is when he or she yanks a toy away from another child and says, “Mine!” When there are plenty of other toys to play with, the one in the hands of another child suddenly becomes the favorite toy.

As we grow, we *continue* to grasp for our possessions and for more. We have an irrational fear that one day, we will not have enough. So we shore up all that we have and are hesitant to give anything away. What if we need it one day? Though the

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<sup>4</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 491.

size of homes in the U.S. more than doubled between 1950 and 2011, the personal storage industry in the United States was valued at \$22 billion dollars in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

Houses are bigger and so are our storage units. But national happiness is declining. It is common to hear people say, “Money (or possessions) doesn’t buy happiness.” And that’s *true*. But we don’t act like it.

Though we intuitively know that possessions cause us *stress*, we still see them as an ultimate *good*. We see possessions as security. We see possessions as a measure of one’s status. We see possessions as a measure of *who* we are. We think that if we are someone worthy, we will have many and wonderful possessions.

But, people of God, possessions do *not* lead to happiness. As Jesus said in verse 15, “Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed; a [person’s] life does not consist in the abundance of his [or her] possessions.”

Anna-Marie, our Junior High Youth Director, shared with me a revelation the students had on their home mission trip last summer. When collecting cans for our FISH food pantry, the students recognized a correlation between the size of the house and the size of the donation. The bigger the house, the less they gave. The smaller the house, the more they gave. The students noticed that marked difference and decided that as they grow, they want to be generous, *especially* if they have more.

You and I have an insatiable desire for more, but it will never be fulfilled with possessions. The more we have, the more we will want. And the more we have, the more we will want to keep it for ourselves.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/opinion/sunday/living-with-less-a-lot-less.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/opinion/sunday/living-with-less-a-lot-less.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2)

Since greed is a part of the human condition, what practical steps can we take to lessen greed's grip on us? Perhaps this means that instead of paying for a storage unit to protect things we won't see in years, we minimize – we donate what is in storage and the monthly storage payments to the poor. Perhaps this means not upgrading to the latest model of electronics immediately, to practice not needing to be in style with the latest cell phones, tablets, and game systems. Perhaps this means including others into our budgeting plans and decisions regarding raises and financial gifts. I am with you – this is *not* an easy one. Perhaps this means creating a list of the things of which we are thankful, when we desire what someone else has.

(Slowly) What freedom is the Spirit inviting you into, to loosen the hold greed has on you? Remember the man whom God asked to give up the one thing. I invite you to close your eyes and open your hands. Consider that which the Spirit is calling you to give up, to loosen the grip greed has on you. Pray to release that to God. Tell someone, that you know will keep you accountable. And instead of greed holding you, you will place yourself in the hold of a brother or sister in Christ, who will hold you accountable.

Church, be encouraged! We are doing this together! Everything we have, even our lives, is on loan. God knows what we need. He loves us and will provide for our needs. Amen.