

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Healthy Community
Luke 12:13 – 21

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, we enter into our fourth and final sermon in our “Out of Hibernation” series. Like grizzly bears, we needed to go into a form of hibernation for a time, and now we are coming *out* of hibernation, considering our purpose, proof, hope, and community.

When grizzlies come out of hibernation, it is a slow, investigative process, determining *when* the right time is to emerge. And this emergence is gradual – it may take one to two weeks to completely emerge, and not every bear emerges at the same time – first it’s the males, then solitary females, then females with cubs.¹ But once they have emerged and have begun their life in the “new normal,” they do *not* go off into their separate ways – they remain together to teach and to learn. The young cubs need to learn how to hunt, fish, to live outside the den, and it’s the *pack’s* job to teach them. **(picture)**

Before becoming a pastor, I served in youth ministry for a few years. I can candidly say that I don’t remember much of what I taught, but I *deeply* remember some of the lessons that I *learned* during that time.

One of those lessons came from a family with three girls. The father’s work took him away from his family for weeks on end at times. His work schedule was a hardship on the whole family, but they made a plan to navigate his absence to the best of their ability. They decided that they would make the most of the time with their dad when he was home, and that they

¹ <https://www.yellowstonepark.com/things-to-do/yellowstone-bear-hibernation>

would widen their family network. It wasn't that they didn't have local family – they *did*. But they wanted to *expand* their family, their village. They envisioned their girls becoming teenagers and getting into the scrapes that are part and parcel of growing up. They knew that there would be times when mom and dad or aunt and uncle wouldn't cut it – an outside voice would be necessary. So they chose godparents from their church family whose roles were to be mentors to their daughters. They chose them and invited them to help raise their girls. They knew, unlike anyone I have ever seen, that it takes a village to raise a child.

In our Gospel lesson today, we hear an *opposite* story, and one worth hearing. Let's start with the context. *Thousands* have gathered around Jesus. Verse 1 says they're *trampling* on one another. Jesus' disciples are there, as well as thousands of others. Jesus is preparing them for the End, teaching them that hardship will come but the Holy Spirit will be with them. In the middle of his teaching, a man interrupts him and *demand*s that Jesus tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him.

This interruption seems like a mystery, because Jesus didn't do things like this in his ministry. He responds in verse 14, saying, **(verse)** “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

What's interesting is that this was actually *common* practice for rabbis. Kenneth Bailey, a theologian who studied Middle Eastern peasant culture for years, wrote, “First-century rabbis were experts in the law of Moses and spent their time giving legal ruling.” There was even a case of a famous rabbi, “Johanan Ben Zakki, a contemporary of Jesus, who moved from Galilee to Jerusalem because he [didn't] hear enough cases. Not enough people were coming to him

with precisely the kinds of concerns that this petitioner expresses. The [man] hoped Rabbi Jesus would take his case.”²

There are a number of interesting things happening here. 1. The man asks Jesus to do something that would have been *normal* for someone in Jesus’ position. 2. The man does not *ask* Jesus to take on his case; he *demand*s it. 3. And Jesus does *not* respond kindly. He calls him “man” – not “friend” or another term of endearment. Jesus calls him the name of someone *distant* from him, “man,” and *refuses* to arbitrate his case. Who appointed Jesus a judge or arbiter between this *man* and his brother (Lk 12:14)?

What might not be immediately obvious is that in the man’s *demand for arbitration*, his *relationship* with his brother has already been broken. He was unable to sort out the affair with his brother *privately*, and he makes the matter *public* by bringing it to Jesus, with *thousands* gathered around. *Everyone* knows what the man wants, what the man *believes* is justice.³

But Jesus refuses to take on the man’s case. He responds with a warning and a story.

The land of a rich man produced a bumper crop. **(picture)** The man is wealthy enough that he doesn’t need to sell the produce from this year’s crop. He decides that instead of contributing to this year’s harvest, he will wait until he can make an even *greater* profit. By withholding his produce, he “secures his economic power and position of status in the village as others are made more and more dependent on him.”⁴ The man is *more* than satisfied with his plan. He’s *proud* of his plan, in fact. He can imagine himself taking life easy, drinking, and making merry. But what the man *doesn’t* realize is that his days are numbered. The man thinks

² Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 301.

³ Bailey, 300.

⁴ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 491.

he is wise, but God says he's a *fool!* He has made *selfish* plans, and who will those plans profit when he dies?

This story sounds like a familiar story of greed. The "haves" shore up an abundance for themselves, and the "have nots" are at their mercy. But there is yet *another* dimension to this story. In this man's culture, even *trivial* decisions are made *only after* long discussions with family and friends. "But this man appears to have no friends...and with an important decision to make the only person with whom he can have a dialogue is himself."⁵ The man is *friendless*. He has *no one* with whom he can discuss his plans, so he talks to himself.

This is not simply a story of a greedy man. This is a story of a greedy, *friendless* man, who doesn't know that his days are numbered. It's a *very* sad story!

A few nights ago, I watched the *Friends Reunion*. There were a number of interesting aspects to that special, but to me, the oddest *and* most interesting segment was when they interviewed people from all over the world, who shared stories of how the sitcom edified and *saved* their lives. Each person identified a *deep longing* for relationship, for friends who would never leave them, and they settled for a sitcom. What was intended to be *impactful* felt empty and *sad*.

How often do we recognize a longing within ourselves and misidentify the solution? We feel dissatisfied, so we buy something new. We are bored, so we eat. We want to enjoy our future, so we work hard and don't take vacations. We want to be respected, so we look busy. We want friends, so we watch tv. We want security, so we store up and isolate ourselves.

⁵ Bailey, 303.

To the man, Jesus essentially says, “What if you win the fight over your inheritance? What then? Life is not about how much you have. Your life is on loan from God, and only *He* knows how many days you will live. Be on guard against greed, because it destroys the most important thing in life – relationships.”

Greed *destroys* relationships. This is a difficult teaching, but you and I know it’s true.

Like the grizzly’s season of hibernation, you and I weren’t told how long our hibernation would last. No one could say for sure, because no one knew. No one knew how bad it would get nor how much some would benefit. We were told at the beginning that COVID was a great equalizer. But we’ve come to discover that though *everyone* has been affected, it has not affected us equally. It has been an especially *unequal* and *unfair* season.

As we emerge from hibernation, we begin with that honest assessment, and we grieve. We grieve those we’ve lost. We grieve the ways in which we have been more concerned with our survival than with loving our neighbor. We grieve the pain of our brothers and sisters whose communities have been decimated, whose jobs have been lost, and who have been the target of hate crimes.

As we come out of hibernation and look around, we name the pain within ourselves and the pain of our local and global community. And we grieve. Life was *not* meant to be this way. Life was *meant* to be lived in perfect, healthy community with one another and with God. But sin came into the world and has infected all of us. It’s infected you, and it’s infected me. It’s caused our hearts to be naturally selfish and self-centered, even though we *desperately* wish that weren’t the case. You and I were made for healthy community, but we constantly battle this purpose to serve and *preserve* ourselves. And this is why Jesus came. He came to deliver

you and me from this bondage to ourselves, this bondage to sin, and to show and make a better way.

As the church, we pray and we strive to embody this better way, that God's kingdom would come on earth, as it is in heaven. We strive to be the healthy community that God created us to be, to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which we have been called, and to pray for it (Jer 29:7).

Last year, our Leadership Council was keenly aware that COVID could have a severe effect on the economy. We had honest conversations about what that might mean for the church as individuals and as a community. We didn't want to have our heads in the sand, but to have our eyes wide open to make wise decisions. And we discovered that generosity *increased* and that many in the congregation did *not* struggle financially. But that did *not* mean business as usual. We recognized that we have a great privilege and responsibility. When schools were forced to close last year, we recognized our responsibility to the families in our preschool. We wanted to continue to support them during this trying time by maintaining their classes and not charging them. We recognized our responsibility to our preschool teachers and staff, and continued each person's employment. We increased employment on our church staff, and looked for ways to support our community.

We heard about a new initiative called United Against the Poverty Pandemic, put together by the Healing Grove, CityTeam, local churches and non-profits, in consultation with the city. United Against the Poverty Pandemic was born out a serious concern for a homelessness epidemic in Santa Clara County. The eviction moratorium had been extended through January, and without intervention, 14,600 *families* were expected to become homeless

in our county. As a council, we knew that *this* was something that we needed to support.

(pause) And then the eviction moratorium was extended. Some funds had already been distributed, but it became clear to Healing Grove that a pivot was necessary. What was *really* needed during this time was employment for our vulnerable neighbors, and I have the glad update to share that our gift has gone to support this employment initiative. I'd like to share a video with you. **(video)**

We have the great privilege and responsibility to one another and to our community. I am thankful for the work of God in and through the ministry of Healing Grove, and for our partnership with them.

As we come out of hibernation, may our lives be marked by generosity and love. May we be the healthy community we were created to be – in perfect relationship with God and one another. And may God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven!

Our father, which are in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On Earth, as it is in Heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For thy is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Forever
For thy is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Forever
Amen⁶

⁶ <https://www.metrolyrics.com/the-lords-prayer-lyrics-andrea-bocelli.html>