August 4, 2013 – 11th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)

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It's tempting to think of today's Gospel story simply in terms of greed. While it is somewhat accurate, to do so makes it safe and easy for us to listen to. Of course, the Rich Fool was a greedy so and so. Of course, God was mad at him. Of course, WE aren't like that. Of course, of course, of course.

But the thing is, the rich man in this story wasn't really doing anything overtly wrong, at least by modern standards. Just like Martha wasn't doing anything wrong a couple of weeks ago, nor were the priest and the Levite from the Good Samaritan story before that. Martha was just trying to be a good hostess, and the priest and the Levite were just trying to be good Jews, and the rich man was just trying to be a good manager of his assets, so that they would keep him comfortable for a long time. That's not necessarily a BAD thing, right?

They weren't doing anything technically wrong, and yet they are cast as the antagonists in these stories. Why is that?

The other day I watched a documentary called the Queen of Versailles. It's the story of a very wealthy Florida family who decide that their 12,000 square foot house just isn't big enough, so they set out to build the largest house in America, modeled after Versailles in France. It's 90,000 square feet, and will carry a 100 million dollar price tag when the dust settles.

During the two years in which they were filming the movie, the recession hit. The husband was the largest builder of time-shares in the country, and the bottom fell out of the time-share business rather dramatically. You would think that this guy would have enough money to carry him over, but the problem was he took out a 45 million dollar mortgage on his giant unfinished house, which he had paid for in cash, in order to build a fancy new timeshare building in Las Vegas. A building that now no one was investing in.

All of a sudden, this family had to "scrape by." They had to sell their private plane and several cars, and lay off many, many employees. The giant house was foreclosed on and building stopped. At one point in the movie, the wife takes a friend out to the property and walks through it, point out what would have been – there's where the ballroom would have been, or there's where my five thousand square foot dressing room would have been, etc., etc. Later in the movie, it's the husband's birthday, and the wife and kids try to make him a birthday cake, with limited success since no one knows how to use the kitchen. Ordinarily, they would have just called a caterer and had a lavish party, but that's now out.

It's weird – the viewer ends up sort of feeling sorry for these people. With their money gone, they're absolutely helpless. But at the same time, the viewer feels smug and superior. Of course WE would never be like them!

*And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against* ***all*** *kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*

The rich man in our story thinks he's being wise and clever by storing up grain and hoarding it when he gets a good crop. He's doing just like Joseph did in Egypt, right? That's good management. That's good business. That's saving for a rainy day. The difference between him and Joseph, of course, is that Joseph was doing so at God's direction, and for the good of the people. The rich man was doing it solely for himself.

*And he thought to himself, `What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, `I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, `Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

It's all about the rich man – I will build, I will store, I will say to my soul relax, eat, drink, be merry. I, I, I! There is no thought of sharing, no thought of community good in his actions, and no thought of his heirs. It's all for him. And there's no gratitude to God for providing the abundant crops. There certainly is no consideration of the Jewish tradition of offering the first fruits of the harvest back to God.

So this rich guy is eating, drinking, and being merry, and maybe rolling around in piles of cash, when all of the sudden God taps him on the shoulder and says "time's up!"

When God calls the rich man 'You Fool,' he is not yelling at him or insulting him. He's telling the rich man how it is – that he has literally lost his mind by concentrating on his earthly wealth. And now, at the moment of reckoning, not only can he not take his riches with him, but he hasn't made any provision for them to go to anyone else. His life has basically been wasted. You could almost feel sorry for him.

Until, that is, you think about the reality of poverty in this country and of how most of the wealth is hoarded in the figurative and literal grain silos of a very few people. And the mentality of more, more, more, pervades our society at every level. Every commercial, every ad, every celebrity endorsement, is designed to get us to buy more stuff.

And what are the measures of success in this country? Not the highest standard of living, not the best health care, not the fewest people below the poverty line. No, the measures of success are on the individual level – how many millionaires and billionaires do we have? Who has the most expensive house – that would probably that guy in Florida who has since recovered all his money and is happily building again – or who has the most toys? Who can spend the most money on their over the top wedding? And who can get away with making the most money and paying the fewest taxes? And on and on and on.

But if it were only those things, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. I don't think God necessarily dislikes rich people per se. Jesus certainly told a few rich people to sell all they have and give the money to the poor, but he didn't tell that to EVERY rich person he ran across.

In today's story, the rich man took it one step further. He hoarded more than he could possibly use in his lifetime, which turned out to be much shorter than he had anticipated. He kept his wealth locked away so that it couldn't benefit anyone but him. THIS is what would anger God, if I may presume to say what makes God mad.

In today's rhetoric we hear a lot of people complaining about moochers, who are only out for what they can get for free. Users, lazy, takers, freeloaders, drains on society, good money after bad, thieves.

I shouldn't do this because it makes my blood pressure go up, but I Googled poverty statistics for 2013. Here are a couple of the choicer ones:

* [One out of every six](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2302997/U-S-sees-highest-poverty-spike-1960s-leaving-50-million-Americans-poor-government-cuts-billions-spending.html) Americans is now living in poverty.  The number of Americans living in poverty is now at a level not seen since the 1960s.
* [More than 146 million Americans](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/15/census-shows-1-in-2-peopl_1_n_1150128.html) are either "poor" or "low income".
* [20 percent](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2302997/U-S-sees-highest-poverty-spike-1960s-leaving-50-million-Americans-poor-government-cuts-billions-spending.html) of all children in the United States are living in poverty.  Incredibly, a [higher percentage](http://fcd-us.org/resources/2012-child-well-being-index-cwi#node-1314) of children is living in poverty in America today than was the case back in 1975.
* The number of children living on $2.00 a day or less in the United States has grown to [2.8 million](http://phys.org/news/2012-02-extreme-poverty-million-children-day.html), an increase of 130 percent since 1996.
* For the first time ever, [more than a million](http://www.nlchp.org/view_release.cfm?PRID=148) public school students in the United States are homeless.
* O[ne out of every four](http://www.heartlandalliance.org/whatwedo/advocacy/reports/causes-of-poverty.pdf) workers in the United States brings home wages that are at or below the poverty level.
* The number of Americans on food stamps now exceeds [the entire population of Spain](http://cnsnews.com/news/article/food-stamp-rolls-america-now-surpass-population-spain).

I'm not telling you all this because I think we should all necessarily go out and empty our wallets and give it all to some homeless person, although if you were so inclined to do that, it might not be a bad idea. It would certainly make the homeless person's day.

But rather, it's our minds that have to change, and this is where we as a church come in. It is our job, as people of faith, to show and tell the world that everything comes from God and belongs to God, and that we are only custodians of his gifts while we are on this earth. As good custodians, we are charged with doing what the owner wants us to do with his property. In this case, God wants us to share the gifts of the earth with everyone. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us that certain people get to amass great piles of money and things while others go hungry. And nowhere in the Bible does it say that ownership of material things and wealth should take precedence over God, himself, who has provided it all for us.

But we are fighting an uphill battle. The haves are too busy trying to hold on to everything they have and the have nots are too busy trying to survive. So we have to start at home, right here at Grace. We have to, each of us, examine our conscience around what we give to the service of God. Are we giving 10% of our income – the first fruits of our labor? If not, why not? And if we can't do that, what else are we doing to further God's kingdom on earth?

And we as a church community – what are we doing? Are the first fruits of our budget directed towards outreach and mission? If not, why not? What more can we do?

These are not only financial questions – they are theological ones. Do we believe in our hearts that everything comes from God? If so, what is our reaction to that belief? If not, what's the alternative? We are a church. We are people of faith. We are the Body of Christ. If we leave our thanksgivings and our sacrifices on the altar and don't take them into the world, are we just selfishly storing them up in grain bins against a rainy day? What about the needs of the world now?

The Gospel says, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Whatever being rich toward God means to us, today – right now – is the day to start putting it into action.

Amen