

The Things You Have Prepared  
Luke 12:13-21  
August 5, 2007

Somehow I don't think Jesus liked being told what to do and he definitely didn't like getting involved in family quarrels. A few weeks ago we heard Martha, a dear friend, say to Jesus about her sister Mary, "Tell her to help me." Martha had been left with all the preparation for their dinner together while Mary sat quietly at Jesus feet listening to the conversation in the front room. But Jesus refused to be drawn in to Martha's squabble with her sister.

In today's reading, Jesus is teaching in a crowd, when a stranger approaches him and says, "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Again Jesus refuses. Sister against sister, brother against brother – fighting among themselves for what is theirs, for what they're due, for what they think is their fair share – whether it is of the kitchen work or the family inheritance. And Jesus says "no – that's not my job."

But even though he won't come to the rescue, he takes time in both situations to offer a little bit of advice. To Martha, one whom he loves, he gently suggests she calm down, take a deep breath, and see that the problem is within herself and not with her sister. And for this nameless man, whom he's probably never met, he offers some other advice. Not so lovingly given as to Martha, but nonetheless probably appropriate for the situation. "Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And then he told a parable about an incredibly rich man, who had more than he knew what to do with. He had so much that he had to tear down his barns and build bigger barns to hold all of his wealth. He felt very satisfied and confident, secure in his possessions and the protection they provided. He thought he had more than enough for many years to come so that he could eat, drink, and be merry, and not give a second thought to the future. But alas, sort of like Ebenezer Scrooge, he received a dire warning of impending death, but without Ebenezer's opportunity for a second chance. In fact, it would be all over that very night as he sat so comfortably, musing over his good fortune.

The story ends with a very pointed and unanswered question, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" I wonder if the man who died so unexpectedly had two sons, and if it was one of those sons who was standing there that day asking Jesus for his help in getting his hands on his fair share of his father's material goods. If so, how sad. His father's dead and all the son can think about are his possessions. All he has left his sons are some big barns full of important, expensive stuff. And the two sons are willing to sacrifice their relationship in a brother-against-brother fight over who gets the goods. This is their inheritance – their father taught them well; by his example he taught them to value money and possessions above all else; and so it is appropriate that all they want to remember him by are his big barns, his 401-K, his Lexus, and his cabin in the mountains.

It kind of reminds me of the Harry Chapin's song from a generation ago, "Cat's in the Cradle" where the father who has "planes to catch and bills to pay," misses out on his son's formative years always promising that sometime in the future he'd come home and they'd have a good time then. Unknowingly he leaves a legacy, a child who says, "I'm gonna be like you dad, You know I'm gonna be like you" And sure enough, in the last verse of the song, the father is old and asks his son to visit, but is told, "I'd love to Dad, if I can find the time; you see my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu, but It's sure

nice talking to you Dad; it's sure nice talking to you." And the father realizes too late, "He'd grown up just like me; my boy was just like me."

Will Willimon has written, "As a pastor, if I were asked, 'Why do you think the American family is in trouble?' I wouldn't cite Hollywood's sex and violence in the movies. I would never think of the gay rights movement. I would say materialism. Lots of my people are literally working themselves to death, working themselves out of a marriage, out of a family."<sup>1</sup> How many of us, or people we know are working just that hard? And for what end?

Maybe it takes a wake-up call to see ourselves in the rich fool. Several times over the last week, I heard persons who had survived the terrible bridge collapse in Minneapolis say that their terrifyingly close encounter with death had caused them to value each day, to see life from a different perspective, and to reorder their priorities. And sometimes it takes a shock like that, a near death experience, the loss of a job, a serious illness, and suddenly that barn full of things that we think are so important doesn't look nearly as satisfying as it did before.

Evy McDonald was a successful business woman whose goal was to become the youngest hospital administrator in the country. Her well-outfitted executive's closet boasted 70 pairs of shoes and 100 blouses. And 50, 60, and 70 hour work weeks were the norm. But then she became seriously ill, and her prospects for survival were slim. At that point, she was confronted with questions about the meaning of her life, and she wrote, "Who did I want to be when I died?" and then she went on to say, "What I discovered was that I didn't want to have the most things. What I wanted my life to be about was understanding love, understanding service, and feeling whole and complete." When her disease went into unexpected remission, she said that "on my road to health, I saw that I needed to integrate my life. I needed to become a whole person."<sup>2</sup>

I believe becoming a whole person is part of what salvation is all about, part of what Jesus models for each of us in his life. A few verses after this parable, he says "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." And so our question for this morning might be "Where is our heart?" or, in the words of the parable, "What are the things we have prepared?" Whose will they be? What do we want to leave to our children? A barn full of stuff – that they'll just have a big garage sale to get rid of – a bank account full of money that still won't buy them happiness. Or is there something of greater value than material possessions that we can pass on to our children and our children's children?

I have read recently that Boomers, as they now approach retirement, are beginning to think about their legacy. They wonder how they will be remembered. What influence will they have had on the world, their circle of acquaintances, their family and friends? Will the world be made poorer by their absence, or just less crowded? What do they value most, and what do they want to make sure those who come after them know and understand? Some have even decided in addition to their regular will, delineating how their property is to be divided, that they will write an "ethical will," that shares their values, blessings, life lessons, hopes and dreams for the future, love and forgiveness. And sometimes these wills are shared with family members while the author is still alive.<sup>3</sup> There are even websites now that can assist you in writing an ethical will and at Amazon.com you can purchase ethical will kits!

However, for persons of faith, we want to leave more than our ethical values. We want to impart our spiritual values. We want our children to know and understand when they remember us what the great commandment looked like in action – to be able to say

“in my mother, in my father, in my sister, in my friend-- I saw a person who loved God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and their neighbor as themselves.”

I don't usually give homework after a sermon, but today it feels appropriate. Sometime today or this week, take a little quiet time to think and pray seriously about what things you are preparing, and whose they will be. Sometimes we get so busy getting ahead that we can forget where we need to be going. Steven Covey famously asked what good is it to reach the top of the ladder if your ladder is propped against the wrong wall. So, let's take some time to ask – where is our ladder propped? What kind of legacy are we creating and will we leave? And, will those who come behind us find us faithful?

Rev. Lisa Caine  
Oconee St. UMC  
Athens, GA

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, “Majoring in the Minors,” *Pulpit Resources*, XXXII, 3; July-Sept., 2004, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> John DeGraaf, David Wann, Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Weil, M.D., *Healthy Aging*, NY: Anchor Books, 2005, p. 290.