

“Rich Toward God”

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11;

Luke 12:13-21(22034)

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From the Pulpit

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Sr. Minister, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 13, July 31, 2016, dedicated to all the men and women who serve our nation in the Military, the Police, and as Fire-fighters, to Joplin Jolene Logel on her baptismal day & always to the glory of God!

“Rich Toward God”

Hosea 11: 1-11; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21(22-34)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Each one of us is designed differently. Most people are wired to think and feel for others. But some people are wired to think about themselves only. **The first are “rich toward God.”** But some are rich toward themselves.

In today’s Gospel, our rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth - who literally gave his life for the life of the world, for everyone - is presented with solving a problem he refuses to engage. A man yells from the crowd, *“Teacher, order my brother to give me a*

fair share of the family inheritance.” Jesus replied, “*Mister, what makes you think it’s any of my business to be a judge or mediator for you?*” (The Message, Luke 12:13-14). While it was not uncommon for people in Jesus’ time to bring unsettled disputes to respected rabbis, Jesus was not going to get trapped as mediator of a family squabble. Instead, he claimed the moment as a teaching moment.

What unfolds in the next 19 verses of Luke’s Gospel is a beautiful exposition on those who possess much wealth and those who possess very little. Jesus does this through a series of parables and short sayings. It is a magnificent moment for all of us to absorb.

Here in the countryside of Galilee, Jesus tells a story - of a farmer who is quite successful. Jesus does not draw a caricature of a rich person. This man has not been handed wealth from his father. He has not cheated or stolen from anyone. He has not mistreated his workers or committed any criminal acts. He has never taken advantage of anyone in business transactions for his own personal gain. The sun, soil and rain have joined together to make him wealthy. He is conservative and careful. He is not unjust. So what is he? Simply this – he is a “**rich fool**” says the parable. He lives completely for himself. He talks to himself. He advises himself. He plans for himself. He congratulates himself.

Simply stated - **He cannot see beyond himself**. There is no story in all of scripture so full of the words, “I, me, my and mine.” A teacher once asked her students what parts of speech “my” and “mine” are. A young girl answered, “*Aggressive pronouns.*” This rich fool is aggressively self-centered. There is too much ego in his cosmos. While this man had a superfluity of goods, the one thing that never enter his head or heart, is to give any away. Essentially, his whole attitude is the reverse of Christianity. He aggressively affirms himself. Instead of finding happiness in giving he only held on to what was his.

And then he dies.

The man who could never see beyond himself also never saw beyond this world. His bigger barns which replaced his smaller barns held all he owned. Once he was gone all he had to show for life on earth was barns full of rich stores of grain and food he left behind for a self which was dead and gone. The man who lived only for himself in this world had nowhere to go in the next. His profits added up to nothing. In Jesus’ question from Luke 9:25 we are haunted by the absence of eternal hope when we look at such a life as this: “*What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?*”

Only Luke’s Gospel holds this story of the rich fool. This haunting indictment of a man with no vision of anyone

beyond himself and his own wealth grabs our consciousness. Living only for yourself in this world gives you no vision for those who surround you in this world – no compassion, no humility, no otherness in a world which beckons us to care, to walk humbly and to see our neighbors in their need.

Jesus says it so beautifully in Luke 12:21, *“He heaps up treasure for himself and he is not rich toward God.”* He is not rich toward God.

Do you know anyone like this? Do you know anyone who has lived his life in a self-possessed way and cares only for his own stuff? He can't see beyond himself. He uses only “aggressive pronouns” – “Me and Mine and not us and ours.” Do you know anyone who serves himself and not God or others? His entrance into eternal peace is not possible because he has been blinded by “I, me, my and mine.” The answer is yes. The hope is not any one of us....

Although our reading ends today as verse 21, most readings of this section of Luke 12 continue through verse 34. This is where Jesus tells you how to live your life as **“rich toward God.”** He calls us to be free from anxiety. Do not get worked up about what you possess and don't possess. Life is something more than food and clothing. God feeds the ravens who possess nothing and the lilies of the field grow in spite of

their being so small and seemingly insignificant. Yet, they are more beautiful than Solomon in all his adorned glory! DO not be anxious. **Seek God's** kingdom of love. Trust that God will care for you. Clothe your soul with honor, purity and goodness and nothing on earth will injure you. Make your treasure in heaven. **Make it in God's storehouse!** For where your treasure is – there your heart will be also. (paraphrase of Luke 12:22-34).

This is what “rich toward God” looks like. A person who lives a life which is “rich toward God” lives a life of trust in God and others. Birds and flowers can be your teacher because you are aware and alive in the creation which God has made. **When you are “rich toward God” You give and give and give again. You don't furrow your brow with anxiety but your forehead and face are filled with smile lines as you grow old in God. When you are “rich toward God” You are not seduced by your money and your wealth. You are generous in giving to others. When you are “rich toward God” You are this way because you know your treasure is in heaven, not in a barn or a tower, which you built with your own resources.**

Since the first words in Luke's first chapter when Mary sings her song of Liberation (which we call the Magnificat), we have known that the difficult and seductive subject of **possessions would come back on the lips of Mary's son. A**

woman who raises her child as well as Mary raised Jesus is a mother who knows giving to God and others will guide the actions of her children.

Being rich toward God means we live our lives as **“theologically conservative liberal evangelical Biblicists”** – to quote The Rev. Dr. William Barber, II who spoke Thursday night in Philadelphia. Dr. Barber has led the people of North Carolina to forge a **“Moral Monday Movement.”** Each Monday a vast array of people of all faiths gather at the Statehouse for Prayer leading to action on behalf of the poor of their state. Dr. Barber **lifted up concern about “those who say so much about what God says so little and say so little about what God says so much.”** With a clear voice, he called us to be **stewards of God’s word and the blessings we receive from God,** not possessors of that which we have accumulate for ourselves.

My sisters and brothers in faith, we can be restorers of the breach, healers of the nation, not just sideline critics and outside observers. In the times in which we live, we are called to jump in and then to stand together in the love of God. We need to stand together in the heart of God. When we do this, we will be standing in the heart of Christianity as well. And Jesus will look on us and say – these wise ones are rich -toward God.”

So I invite you to join the wealthiest club that has ever existed – the Jesus movement. In following him, you will find yourself rich beyond measure --- rich toward God. Amen.

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