

“How Is Your Portfolio?”
Luke 12:13-21

The economic worldview of a toddler is a very interesting one. It goes something like this, “If I want it, IT'S MINE! If I give it to you and change my mind later, IT'S MINE! If I can take it away from you, IT'S MINE! If it's mine it will never belong to anybody else, no matter what. If we are building something together, all the pieces are mine! If it looks just like mine, IT'S MINE! If it breaks or needs putting away, IT'S YOURS!”

The sad reality is that such a worldview is the one that is often presented to us as the ideal by the media and our popular culture. We are told that competition is good for the market. I am sure it is. But we tend to forget to ask if it is always good for the soul. What is the impact of a mentality of competition and search for more money on our souls?

Now this is not to be confused with the value of hard work and being industrious. I remember as a child hearing the story of the ants and the cricket. The ants worked all summer storing up grain and food while the cricket sat on a branch and sang and played all summer. When the winter came, the ants stayed in their homes while the cricket was outside shivering with nothing to eat. The moral of the story was always about the value of hard work and preparation. This is a lesson I still try to instill in my own daughter about school work and other activities. However, the value of hard work and the human desire for more money often get confused. We tend to associate wealth and having a lot of financial resources with our instinct for survival. The result is often greed which is often a drive that can never be satisfied.

In today's Bible story Jesus deals with this very issue of greed. This is one of those stories that often makes people uneasy, especially people of financial means. We wonder if Jesus was condemning rich people or if he was condemning sound financial planning. After all, this is the only place we hear Jesus saying that God was calling someone a fool. Yet, as we look at the context of the story carefully, we can understand the heart of the message of today's Bible story. The man who comes to Jesus asking him to convince his brother to divide the inheritance with him is seeking something that was against the way people of that time practiced economics. In ancient Israel the oldest son was to receive a double portion of the inheritance, which in Greek, *Kleronomia*, meant specifically, “real estate,” or land. This way the land which was given freely to the people of Israel would stay divided equally according to families and tribes. The man's request of Jesus was an indicator of greed because what he wanted was his share of the land so that he could take it away and separate himself from the rest of the family. Normally what families did was keep the land and work it together to support them all instead of dividing it up into small pieces of land that would not be able to support a whole family. What the brother was looking to do was going directly against the way the people of Israel were called by God to share the land. That is why Jesus refuses to be an arbitrator between the brothers and he also challenges the man about his ways of greed. The parable that he tells him does not condemn wealth and good crops. It does not condemn good financial planning with the man wanting to build a bigger barn for more storage. The parable does not imply that the man was going to go to hell for all of this. What the parable seems to hit hard on is the foolishness of greed and selfishness. The farmer in the parable talks to himself and the whole conversation is focused on his own interests: “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? I will do this..” The whole time the farmer is focused on number 1, himself. This is what provokes God to call the man foolish. The greed and selfishness of the man are some of the strongest traps we fall into as human beings.

The sense of security and power we get from money is not necessarily bad but the problem is when money becomes our guide in life. When financial security becomes our guide, it is hard to trust others and God. In fact, money is one of the worst predictors of anxiety in life. Rich people feel anxious about their investments when the market tanks. Poor people feel anxious about having enough income to make it from one day to the next. Think of the many people who were destroyed socially and financially in the last couple of years with the economic downturn we have had. There is a sense of false security that we tend to have with our financial assets or lack of them. The gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to a different way of being and thinking about money and possessions, but we have to be open to this kind of teaching. We have to move beyond the simplistic teachings that the gospel of Jesus Christ is only concerned with eternal life. The American Jesuit theologian, John Haughey laments that often, "We read the gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the gospel."

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to reexamine our priorities and our cultural assumptions about money and life. Biblical scholar Ched Myers notes that, "The word "evangelism" comes from the Greek /euangel/ we translate as "gospel" or "good news." In first century Hellenistic society it was a term associated with the "secular media." It was synonymous with imperial propaganda, announcing the birth or ascension to power of an emperor or a Roman military victory in the provinces.. It is extraordinary that the early Christians used this term to describe both their story of Jesus (Mk 1:1) and Jesus' own message (Mk 1:14). In a world in which the power and the reach of the imperial media was unrivaled, the early Christians expropriated the term specifically to challenge the dominant culture." Issues related to money were among the most important themes with which Jesus dealt. In the Gospel of Luke we have so many stories about Jesus teaching directly or indirectly about money. To give just a few examples, think of the story of the Pharisees who are condemned because of their greed (11:39), the prodigal son, the parable of the unjust servant, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the story of the Rich Young Ruler, the story of wealthy Zacchaeus and his generosity.

I believe that the most radical message of the gospel for us today from Luke 12 is that it reminds us that life needs to be lived with our view of the big picture in mind because that big picture includes our mortality. We don't live forever. Yet, our worries about money and our planning often reflect a false sense of immortality. The man in the parable is reminded that all of his greed was going to come to a screeching halt with his death.

This kind of harsh reminder is needed in times when greed becomes the dominant way of life. All we have to do to see many of the effects of greed on our lives is to look at the risky practices the banks and Wall Street have engaged in which have led us to where we are today. It is counter-intuitive in our culture today to focus on generosity and fairness as models for success and for healthy economies. But that is the wisdom of the gospel. It is the wisdom of knowing that financial resources are only a part of the big picture of our lives.

In his book, *Money and the Way of Wisdom*, Timothy Sandoval writes that, "Sages across the centuries have long recognized that material prosperity does not inevitably result in spiritual fulfillment and that continued, anxious attempts to buy 'salvation' (as it were) actually diminish human well-being. Our pursuit of the 'good life' through the frenzied pursuit of wealth not only may not pay off, it actually carries its own costs . . . such as anxiety and diminished quality of relations with family and friends."

Even when you look at most wars you can see that they were fought over resources. Follow the money and you can see that people's greed is at the heart of most conflicts. Those who have the resources often end up not wanting to share until they are forced.

We come to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ today seeking communion with God and are reminded that this table is about learning to trust that sharing ultimately is the best way to live. We come reminded that the big picture of our lives is not about the bottom line of our bank account but about the love we have received and given in life. The famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher once said that, "In this world it is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich."

One morning in 1888, Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, was quite surprised to read his own obituary in a French newspaper. Obviously, it was a journalistic mistake. One of his brothers had died, and a careless reporter had used a prewritten obituary of the wrong man. But as he read, Nobel was shocked and deeply disturbed to learn what the world really thought of him. He was seen simply as the dynamite king, the merchant of death, who had amassed a great fortune out of explosives. Nobel had hoped his inventions would be useful to people and to nations. At that moment, Alfred Nobel resolved to show the world the true purpose of his life. He revised his will so that his fortune would be dedicated to the recognition of great creative achievements with the highest award going to those who had done the most for world peace. Today, we all associate him with the Nobel Peace Prize.

When you look at the big picture of our world today, what values do you see yourself embracing for the market, for the rich and for the poor? As you think of the big picture of your life, maybe even of your own obituary, what would you like to see and read? Is money part of the picture or the whole picture for your life? Is your life aligned with the radical values of the gospel of Jesus Christ of love, generosity, care and economic justice? Amen.