

Pentecost 11C + July 31, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 12:13-21

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When our daughter Margaret was a freshman in high school I would make frequent trips with her to the local CVS for things she said she needed. The first few times, the total always seemed to be around \$80. So pretty soon I reminded her that there is a big difference between *want* and *need*. Weren't these were really just things she wanted, but didn't have to have? "No, Mom," she insisted. "These are things I NEED!"

That didn't go on for very long; soon she was curbing her spending, checking sales and using coupons, and now she is very thrifty in what she purchases. But for the first part of her high school career, like many teen girls, possessions were very important to her.

Many of us rely on possessions, things we don't really need, for our sense of well-being. The object of our desire is different for each of us. For me it's books; for Imelda Marcos it was shoes. In our Lydia Circle meeting this week we were reflecting on all those shoes. How many pairs were there? 300, 500? Then I read that Mrs. Marcos once said in her defense, "I did not have *thousands* of pairs of shoes, I had one thousand and sixty."

At the beginning of our reading today from Luke's Gospel, we encounter a man whose top priority is his possessions. The larger scene at the beginning of Luke 12 is that a huge crowd was pressing in on Jesus, so eager to be near him that they trampled on one another. And who speaks up? A man who asks Jesus a question that has nothing to do with who Jesus is, but is a matter for an ordinary rabbi: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Clearly there has been some kind of dispute going on between the two brothers. We often read of these sad situations between siblings. One I came across recently concerned three grown

children whose mother had just died. In her original will she divided her estate equally among them. But in later years, a petty argument arose between the oldest son and the daughter who was the caretaker. In her anger, this daughter persuaded her elderly mother to cut her son out of the will. The son went to court over this and so did the daughter. This dragged on until eventually an amount equal to the entire inheritance was spent on legal fees. So what was left when the money could finally be allocated to help the third sibling, who really needed it? Zero.

Back to this man in the crowd: Rather than point out the foolishness of his question in this context, Jesus addresses the disposition out of which this man's question arose using a parable. Here, we meet a wealthy farmer who was so successful that his barns weren't big enough to hold everything that his land had produced. So he decided to tear down the smaller barns and build huge ones that would hold the unexpected abundance of his crops.

Now, this in itself is not bad. Obviously he was a good farmer, and the decision to store up the excess from the bumper crop was smart from a business perspective. It was probably a good growing year for others, too, so there was more supply than demand. Waiting to sell the rest until the supply went down again would allow him to make a lot more money.

But the farmer tips his hand when he starts talking to himself and imagining how, with his vast storehouse, he can kick back and enjoy the good life: "Relax, eat, drink, and be merry." This shows him to be prideful and concerned primarily with his own well-being. What has happened is that his abundance of crops had become more important to him than his relationship to God. He had forgotten all about God! So what a surprise it must have then been to hear God's voice telling him that his efforts were all for naught—that his life was being taken from him that very night, and all that wealth would be left behind.

The same can be true for us if we're not careful. If we accumulate material things only to enrich ourselves, with no concern for helping others, we actually are LOSING our lives with God. God is no longer the main object of our attention. St. Augustine said, "The beginning of all sin is pride; the beginning of pride is a man's turning away from God." If this happens to us, like the wealthy farmer, we have failed to entrust our lives to God, and as a consequence we have not acted faithfully with respect to all that we own.

Holy Scripture calls us to a different way of being, and Jesus calls us to a new reality. Deuteronomy 24:19 says that "When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings." Even more so, we are called especially in Luke's Gospel to share our possessions and not to be so attached to them that they control us.

What does this mean for us here at Atonement? We don't have a lot of financial wealth to share at this point, so let's ask the question differently. What is the nature of our abundance? And how can that be shared with the world? American theologian and writer Friederick Buecher's well known definition of vocation serves us well here. He said that "vocation is where your deep desire meets the world's deep need." With worship as the foundation for all that we do, what is the vocation of this congregation?

I invite you to ponder this through the lens of stanza 3 of the hymn we are about to sing [Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service].

As we worship, grant us vision / till your love's revealing light
in its height and depth and greatness / dawns upon our quickened sight,
making known the needs and burdens / your compassion bids us bear,
stirring us to ardent service, / your abundant life to share.

Amen.