

“The Unholy Trinity”

OT 18C-19

Luke 12: 13-21

Aug. 4, 2019

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Prayer for Illumination

God of abundant life,

Despite our best efforts to live independently,

We come ready and willing to admit we cannot.

For we need you. We need your Word of Truth and Love come down.

So here and now, be with us, we pray,

that what is said and what is heard might be your truth,

and our response might bring your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 12: 13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him,

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

But he said to him,

“Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

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.”

Then he told them a parable:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly.

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.’

But God said to him,

‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.

And the things you have prepared,

whose will they be?’

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves

but are not rich toward God.”

“The Unholy Trinity”

The exact wording depends on the translation you use. But Scripture addresses the topic of money around 140 times. And a lot of that comes from Jesus himself. In fact, “nearly one third” of Jesus’ parables talk address the topic of wealth in one way or another.¹ So if it seems like we read a lot of Bible passages pertaining to money, it’s because there’s so many that do.

I suspect that’s because, since money’s inception, humanity has lived as if it’s what make the world go round. Money ruled the day before Jesus’ time... It ruled during Jesus time. Just as it does today... even though Jesus repeatedly told his disciples something very different.

If I were to try and summarize everything Jesus ever said or taught about money, it would be something like this. “Money doesn’t make the world go round. Never has. Never will. Only God can do that. So center your life on the love of God, and you can’t go wrong.”

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Now before I go any further, I need to come clean about this. You see, I believe what I just said. I believe Jesus when he teaches that where my heart is there my treasure will be. And I believe Jesus when he says I’m far better off being rich in my relationship with God and my relationships with others than being rich in material wealth. I believe that wholeheartedly.

But that doesn’t mean I still don’t struggle with it. I need to be honest. I’m surrounded by messages from this world—advertisements, neighbors, politicians—telling me we measure the man by the size of the bank account. And we infer the size of the bank account by the size of the home... and the emblem on the car... and the designer name on the shirt pocket. So I find myself daydreaming about what it would be like to have a bigger bank account... because, as society reminds me over and over again, success is measured in dollar signs, right? Success and fulfillment are measured not by how many people you help but how much profit you turn.

But that’s only the half of it. On top of these fantasies of having more, I also get anxious when I think about putting three kids through college. I worry Melissa and I might not be saving enough for retirement. Because, on top of being told I need more to be successful, I’m also constantly told that we live in an economy of scarcity—that there isn’t enough to go around of this thing that makes the world go round. That, in particular, is a point of fear politicians love to lob. Better make sure you’ve got yours.

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I confess all this to you quite openly, because (1) I don’t want to hide behind a veil of hypocrisy and (2) I know you understand these struggles too. I know you live in the same world overflowing with competing claims and false truths of what defines success and what entails security.

So like me, when Jesus says “Money doesn’t make the world go round,” I suspect you believe him, too... in the theological sense. I mean, we get the point he’s trying to make. God rules our world—not the Almighty Dollar. And yet, we still tend to live our lives with money, rather than God, at the center of it

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¹ Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, editors of *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 2*, Daniel E. Harris in Homiletical Article (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 9.

And it's not just you and me, individually.

The struggle is true for the church, as well. While your leadership teams and your Session have, in my opinion, a healthy attitude about money... And while we try hard *not* to let the financial bottom line dictate the decisions we make as a church... The truth is... sometimes it does.

When you live with a deficit budget, it's almost impossible for money not to be a significant factor when discerning how you're going to live into the priorities God is putting before you, even though Jesus says God—and our love for God and God's love for us—should reside at the center of our decisions... not this thing called money.

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Now... all this shared, I want to be clear what this does *not* mean. This does NOT mean that money is bad. It's not. Jesus never said that money is evil or sinful. It's not.

Rather, Jesus seems to make clear that money has no inherent moral value at all. How could it? Money is simply a resource. A tool. An instrument we can use to build wonderful realities. But, like all tools, it can be used to destroy and harm just as easily as it can be used to build up.

So the issue then, isn't money itself. At least I don't think it is. Rather, it's the way we view money. It's the way we treat money. It's the way we use money. *That's* the issue presented in our gospel lesson this morning.

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It begins, frankly, with an all-too-familiar scene. A family dispute over money. Two brothers have lost their father. But rather than consoling each other amid their grief, the brothers are at each other's throats fighting over the inheritance. One of them assumes Jesus would take his side, so he says, "Teacher, tell my selfish brother over there to divide the family inheritance with me."

Jesus, though, has no stomach for it. "You're kidding me, right? Your father has just died and you're asking me to play judge over something as vain as inheritance?"

But lest we think there's something wrong with passing on an inheritance, Jesus goes on to explain that his objection to the question doesn't have anything to do with passing money down, but with our general attitude towards and basic idolatry of money in the first place. He explains it with a parable.

"There was this really rich guy living on bountiful land that produced bountiful harvests. In fact, his harvests were so bountiful that his barns couldn't hold it all. So he asked himself, 'What should I do with all this harvest?' And he answered himself, 'I know! I'll build even bigger barns to store it all. And then, when it's all stored up, I'll say to myself, 'Good job! You are a rich soul, so relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

"But God said to this rich man, 'You fool! You're gonna die tonight, and *this* is what you're worried about? Hoarding your blessings for *yourself*?! You think that's what life is all about? Well then, tell me... what's going to happen to all this stuff once you're gone?'

"When the rich man couldn't answer, God told him, 'So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.'"

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Again, notice Jesus never implies that it was wrong for the rich man in the parable to celebrate a bountiful harvest. Nor did Jesus deem him foolish because he acquired his wealth by dishonest means or treated workers in a harsh way. It's not anything like that.

Rather, the man is deemed foolish because he fundamentally misunderstands the things that make for real wealth—real abundance—in the first place. As the Lutheran scholar David Lose says so well, this man's a fool because he does what we all too often do... worshipping at the feet of *The Unholy Trinity* of me, myself, and I.

Listen again to the rich man's own words. "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? (Then he answered himself), "*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... relax, eat, drink, be merry."

"He lives completely for himself. He talks to himself, he plans for himself, he (even) congratulates himself."²

Therein lies this man's great foolishness. His life centers on his wealth... how he can use it... how he can save it for *himself*. Like the classic Dickens' character, Ebenezer Scrooge... he's so focused on *his* wealth for *his* sake that he doesn't see just how poor in life he really is. For when we live as if money makes the world go round... when we put wealth at the center of our lives... wealth becomes the determining factor for what we do, even though Jesus insists money never has and never will make the world go round. No. Only the love of God does that. God's love for us. And our love for God. A love best exhibited within our love of others. Love experienced amid the beauty of mutuality and reciprocity. Being blessed not to hoard our blessings... but being blessed to share our blessings. Receiving with one hand, while giving with the other.

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This is, in large part, why I have no patience for the so-called Property Gospel. You've heard it, I suspect. The proclamation that God wants you to be successful according to worldly measurements... wealthy in material goods.

But its hogwash. No... it's worse than hogwash. Because it's damaging when money becomes the object of our affection instead of the people we can bless with it. For it is then, Jesus makes clear, that we end up worshipping at the feet of the Unholy Trinity—when all we want is more for me, myself, and I.

This is why Jesus spoke so often about money. As counter-cultural of a message as it was then and still is today... money does not make the world go round. *So let's stop living as if it does...* And let's start embracing the truth that the real treasures of life can't be bought or stored up. They can only be created by the love we invest in those around us.

That, Jesus shows us time and again, is the way of life he came to reveal. A self-giving, self-emptying way of life modeled right at here, at this table, where we see how real life—true life—can never be measured by how much we have. Real life... life as God intends—is measured by the love we pour out.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 163.

Amen.