

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Hosea 11:1-11

Psalms 107:1-9, 43

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Today Jesus tells us a story about a man whose dream comes true. The harvest of a lifetime comes in, and he must decide what to do. No doubt following the advice of his financial advisor, and having studied up on the best methods to retire early, the man comes up with a plan to stretch this remarkable windfall into a holding that will fund him for the rest of his life. He'll tear down his old barns and build much bigger ones, big enough to preserve all of the extraordinary bounty. That way he can "relax, eat, drink, and be merry" for the rest of his life.

And really – what's so bad about that?! I have a hunch that more than a few of us think what he does sounds pretty smart! After all, aren't we supposed to be good stewards and protect our assets for the future? When I picture the man in my head, he looks a whole lot like someone in a Charles Schwab advertisement: managing his wealth, planning for retirement. But the wisdom of a Wall Street brokerage firm is not always synonymous with the wisdom of the Kingdom of God, so this morning I'm going to propose that there are three big reasons why Jesus calls him a fool, and three big lessons Jesus may have for those of us who want to heed his invitation to live richly toward God.

The first is, perhaps, the most obvious, based on how Jesus frames the story. Despite all the man's strategic planning for the future, all his efforts to preserve the windfall in order to fund the rest of his life, if the man died that very night, what *would* become of all that wealth? It's like they say, you can't take it with you when you go, but he had done nothing to share his wealth or ensure it would be a blessing to others after he died. It's like the Gilded Age businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie once said, "The man who dies rich dies disgraced."

Over the past dozen or so years of leading congregations, I've noticed a troubling pattern that sadly resembles Jesus' parable. Men don't like to think they're ever going to die, and they dislike thinking about it all the way into the grave. I have buried more than a few men over the age of 65 who had no will, no estate plan, and who left their surviving spouses and families to deal with a huge pile of legal and financial headaches, all because, presumably, they didn't deal with the fact that they would one day die.

This way of thinking is predominant among men, but we all need to remember not to fall into the trap of pretending we're somehow going to live forever. Please friends, write a will. Make sure it's clear and understandable and legally binding. Tell those who will mourn your death what you want to do with all your worldly

goods and wealth after you die. I hope, as you do this holy work – and it is holy work – that you will remember Transfiguration in your plans. If you’ve loved this church in life, love it in death, too. We have a Legacy Society of people who’ve named Transfiguration as a beneficiary in their estate plans, and it needs many more members. Let the words of Jesus ring in your heart and mind: if this very night your life is demanded of you, the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

The second reason the man is a fool is that he mistakenly believes that somehow he is the only one involved in this extraordinary windfall. The setup of the parable is a harvest of a lifetime, a harvest of astounding proportions, so great they require new barns to house all the crops. Now, I’m no farmer, but I know just enough about agriculture to understand that that kind of harvest involves a whole lot of factors aligning perfectly in your favor. Yes, the man had to plan well and be smart about the timing of planting and application of fertilizers and soil amendments. He had to be diligent in weeding and pest control and work hard for months. That is, he needed to do well with the things in his control.

But he also needed fantastic weather, not too cold early in the growing season or too hot right before harvest. He needed just the right amount of rain, again not too much or too little. He needed lots of pollinators but not pests. He needed fertile seed, and strong animals to pull the plow. And he needed a team of laborers who were willing to work hard for him, and who also had excellent farming instincts. That is, he needed a whole lot of things that were not in his control to also work perfectly.

And yet, when he’s reflecting on his success and counting his money, who does he think of? Who does he thank?

Many Americans believe we live in a meritocracy, which pretty much means we believe that people get what they deserve. If you work hard and have skills and make good choices, you get rewarded. If you are poor, it probably means you don’t work hard and don’t have many skills and have made bad choices. But this meritocratic way of thinking not only causes us to over-simplify poverty in our nation and assume that poor people somehow deserve their condition,¹ it also causes us, when we experience windfalls like the kind this man did in Jesus’ parable, to believe we personally (and exclusively) earned and deserved it.

The truth is that all our circumstances, both good and ill, are dependent upon the actions of others and events that are outside of our control. We are woven together

¹ https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-07-30/u-s-economy-personal-bad-behavior-isn-t-what-causes-poverty?fbclid=IwAR2vz4iY3EpkXaco02PKH0ArXtTY2_ag4_nedutmTvXaC6lB9qtSX0xvF9o

as human beings in relationships, and none of us do anything by ourselves. Which means that, whenever we have moments of extraordinary good fortune, our own proverbial harvest of a lifetime, or even smaller moments of things going our way and causing us to prosper, the proper Christian response is humility and gratitude. Humility to admit that we didn't do it completely on our own; lots of other people, both known and unknown to us, contributed to our success; and gratitude to God and all those around us for our plenty. The man in the parable is a fool, because he is neither humble nor grateful. He only has room in his imagination for himself, and he spares no thought for anyone or anything that helped him. But Jesus invites us to a different, more thoughtful and big-hearted way of living, one in which we take time to show true appreciation to God and the people who've helped us for all that we have.

Third, the man is a fool, because he believes that this windfall is his ticket to a better, happier life – that after he builds bigger barns and retreats into a life of secluded luxury – that things will finally be great. Which, when you think about it, is not unlike what a lot of us believe: that if only we had some big event break our way and transform our personal finances – whether it's a big promotion or inheritance or winning the lottery – we would be happy forever. But that is not how life works.

Scientists who study human psychology have identified something called the hedonic treadmill. The principle of the hedonic treadmill is that every person has a fairly set point of happiness, which cannot really be moved in either direction, up or down, even by dramatic external events or fluctuations in circumstances. The reason is that, the more we experience any pleasure, the more we become numb to its effects, until finally, we no longer feel anything special, and we return back to our standard level of happiness. The most interesting example of this, in my opinion, is a long-term study scientists have conducted on the lives of lottery jackpot winners. We think winning the lottery will result in our perpetual happiness for the rest of our lives – I mean, who wouldn't be happy winning the Powerball?! And yet lottery winners are statistically more likely to go bankrupt in 3-5 years, and when surveyed years after their jackpot, the sentiment shared by many is a resounding unhappiness cynicism and the wish that they'd never won.² When we tie our happiness to our circumstances, and when we focus our lives on pursuing new ways of stimulating our own pleasure and enjoyment, we are really just spinning our wheels on the hedonic treadmill.

But there is a way to escape that cycle, and actually move to deeper levels of contentment and joy: that way is through compassion and generosity.³ These are the foundational tools for living richly toward God, as Jesus instructs at the end of

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/25/heres-why-lottery-winners-go-broke.html>

³ In *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama talk about these two keys to stepping off the treadmill of circumstantial happiness to find deeper joy.

the parable. Compassion and generosity are the heart of a life that is not dependent upon ever-improving circumstances to boost our happiness, because compassion and generosity actually reorient us outward, away from ourselves and toward the needs and hopes of others. When we practice compassion and generosity – you know, when giving is a priority and not just what happens with what we have left over when we're done spending on ourselves; when we spend the same amount of energy seeking ways to bless others as we do treating ourselves; when we open our existing barns up to share with others rather than tearing them down to build bigger ones so we have more for ourselves – when we start to live like that, we step off the hedonic treadmill, and we enable our souls to move to a deeper state of joy.

Yes, the man may have been a fool, but we don't have to follow in his footsteps. We can plan for a future that doesn't involve us. We can be grateful for the ways others have contributed to our success. And we can get off the hedonic treadmill by living compassionately and generously.

Do that, and we will have lived richly toward God.