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Title: Stories on the Way to the Cross: The Barn Builder

Date: March 8, 2020

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Senior Associate Minister

Scripture: [1 Timothy 6:11-19](#)

Text: [Luke 12:13-21](#)

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Jesus preached. Jesus taught. But he also told some great stories – we call them parables. Many of these stories are told on his way to the cross. When Jesus and his disciples walked together over those several days, he prepared them for what was to come. Their lives were changed.

Many of these stories are told in the span of ten chapters in what we call the travel narrative in the Gospel of Luke. His parables lead them to the cross and they are leading us in this season of Lent as well. Jesus' stories prepare us for the cross and the empty tomb. Last week, we explored the familiar story of the "Good Samaritan" and discovered that beyond the obvious message of "care for your fellow human beings regardless of who they are," there is another message. That other message is that God is likely to show up through people that you'd least expect. I encouraged you to watch for it and be aware.

This week, we move a little further down the road in our walk. Just like last week, Jesus is prompted to tell a story by a conversation he's having with someone. Last week, it was the lawyer who asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. This week, Jesus is asked to help arbitrate a dispute that arose in the settlement of an estate. The person asking for Jesus' help feels like he has been treated unfairly in the distribution of assets. While this request being directed at Jesus may strike us as a little odd, such requests for resolution of disputes would have been directed at rabbis and teachers of the time. The separation between legal and religious would have been much less defined than we now know it. But Jesus, rather than weighing in on the specifics of the man's question and handing down a verdict, tells a story – a parable – about barns, crops and the man who manages them.

It is a familiar story that has an uncomfortable ending. The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop and this rich farmer was confronted with a dilemma so we get to listen in as he talks to himself. (It soothes me

somewhat to know that when I do that, people have been talking to themselves for a long time). "What shall I do?" the man says to himself. "I have no place to store my crops. This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" (And now you know where we get that phrase).

That's when God steps in to take the story in a stunning and tragic direction, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Jesus then concludes his story this way, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

If you are about to stop listening because you think this story won't apply to you because you don't see yourself as rich, think again. While it is true that you likely don't have the wealth of Bill & Melinda Gates or Michael Bloomberg, what is true is that we still possess more wealth than 99% of the world's population. The statistic from 2019 says that an income of \$32,400 per year would allow someone to be among the top 1% of income earners in the world.¹ This story confronts us in an area that we don't like to be confronted – our wallet.

Bishop William Willimon was a chaplain for many years at Duke University. He is a well-known writer and speaker. I like him because he says wise things in a witty way. Once Willimon and his wife had a group of students over to their home after a chapel service. They had a picnic, then some of the students lingered to play basketball or to talk. Willimon sat on the patio with one student who said, "Dr. Willimon, thanks for having us over to your home. This is the first time I've ever been in the home of a faculty member." "That's a disgrace," Willimon said. "I think that we faculty ought to have students in our homes as often as possible."

"Well, few of the faculty think that way," said the student. "And you have a beautiful home," he said. Then the student added these words: "Let me ask you, do you feel at all guilty being a Christian and living in such a nice house?" Willimon responded, "Now I'm remembering why it was not such a great idea to invite students over to my house." "Such," says Willimon, "are the challenges of attempting to be Christian in the midst of affluence."²

Back in 2002, a minister by the name of Jim Ball launched a media campaign to struggle with the same question. The question asked of Americans in the media blitz was "What Would Jesus Drive?" The advertising campaign was designed to discourage religious people from driving expensive, high-end

SUVs, pickups, and other gas-guzzling vehicles. Major automakers were forced to respond that they already made fifty models of fuel-efficient cars, but trucks and SUVs were starting to (and still) outsell sedans at dealerships across America.

Comedian Jay Leno even weighed in and said Jesus would drive a big pickup truck since he was in the construction business and already had twelve employees.³ I remember a camp counselor telling me that Jesus drove a Honda but never spoke of it because John 12:49 has Jesus saying, "I did not speak of my own accord." – ...sorry...

In my Bible, the title of the reading from Luke is "The Rich Fool." But what is it that makes him so foolish? By the standards of our society, he is doing pretty well. He has money and makes a good living. He's not breaking the law. He's invested wisely. But, in the story, he is the only person he talks to. He doesn't talk to God; he doesn't talk to his neighbors, he talks to himself, which might be the first obvious problem of foolishness. And in a time and place where many people need what he's producing – mainly food, he's hoarding it for his benefit.

The rich man in Jesus' parable is called a fool not because he was rich and successful, but because he was not rich toward God. It was all about the man. Let me read a portion of the passage again and I want you to count the number of times that the man says the word "I" or "my."

"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;'" I count 11 times. I believe these 11 words hold the key to the meaning of this parable. The "me" and "my" attitude seems to be the point of this story of Jesus and not the man's wealth alone.

Greed can leave you with a lot of stuff on the outside but empty on the inside. And when we die, we leave it all behind. Some of you have been to a workshop that I do occasionally around here about getting your end of life plans in place – if you haven't done that you need to – I have resources. In the presentation, I have a picture of a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer. I don't know the origin of the picture but you really can't take it with you regardless of what the picture would have you believe. What we have when we die does not determine our worth. In fact, our net worth when we are living does not determine our worth. Our worth in God's eyes doesn't hinge on the size of our bank account, our investment portfolio, or how big our barns are. Barns will rot and fall down,

investments move like a roller coaster, but God is impressed with none of it.

Many of you know that we lived in Columbus, Indiana for 15 years before moving to Indianapolis. At that time, I had the privilege to know J. Irwin Miller and have him as an active part of the congregation I served. If that name is unfamiliar to you, he served Cummins Engine Company in various capacities from the 1930s to the 1970s including many years as its president. He met with John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to lobby in favor of the Civil Rights Act and appeared on the cover of Esquire Magazine in 1967 with the headline, "This Man Ought to Be the Next President of the United States."

J. Irwin Miller was, I believe, the wealthiest man I have ever personally known. He was also one of the most generous and compassionate persons I have ever known. Greed was not a part of his DNA and while I knew his desire to use his wealth to help others, I wish I had something in writing to illustrate it for you. I found out last week that there was a new book out about J. Irwin Miller so I promptly ordered AND read it. It is an accurate portrayal of who I knew J. Irwin Miller and his wife, Xenia to be - compassionate, empathetic people always searching for ways to make systemic changes to help others.

Then, on page 139 of the book, there it was – a note written by Irwin Miller and addressed to his five children in which he tries to convey the responsibility that would be theirs given the sizable inheritance they would receive. It was written eight years before his death but I believe Irwin knew that he needed to instill, in writing as he had done in his life, the importance of using the wealth wisely in the service of others.

This is what the note said, "Of all the things we can 'leave to you,' money seems to be the least important.... We have not lived and worked primarily to maximize your inheritance any more than our ancestors lived and worked to maximize our inheritance.... We have lived and worked to make a constructive contribution to our community, church, and nation. And – we have had a good time so doing." The letter was signed J.I.M (his initials), then AKA POP. 4⁴

This side of heaven, our work in following Jesus and becoming more like him is never finished. It happens anew each day as we go back to what God first did for us in our baptism, where our old self was stripped off, and we were clothed with a new self – a self that is seeking God's will, not our own. The old sinful self tells us: "you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." The new self, reborn in

Jesus, asks: what would God have me do today? How can I use what God has given to me to bless others? How can his love be shown to others through me? And that is where we begin to join Jesus on his mission.

Jesus is trying to teach the man upset about the estate settlement - and maybe trying to teach us as well - that our net worth is not what we are worth. Worth is not determined by wealth but by our love of God and love of neighbor. We learned last week that "neighbor" has a pretty broad definition. The question Jesus presses with the rich man and with us is: "Are we managing our money or are we allowing our money to manage us?" Jesus was trying to answer the man's question about inheritance with the notion that empty lives are just as empty when they overflow with things.

While we thought this parable was about our wallet, we discover it's really about our heart. It tells about money's ability to impoverish our soul and rewire our values. The way the parable is framed makes it warn against an egotistic preoccupation with one's own security. The man in the parable has chosen to live in a world of one. Speaking to himself about the pleasures he can enjoy, his words reveal that no one else matters to him.

The I Timothy passage this morning was clear - men and women of God should pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. The place that Jesus is pushing us to with this parable is how we would answer the question, "Is my heart so full of trust and love toward God and neighbor, that even if I lost it all, I'd still feel rich?"

You may be thinking, "I wish I could afford to be generous." Generosity is not a state of the pocketbook, but a state of the soul. Generous people don't give with their wallets and hope that their heart will follow, truly generous people give from the heart and their wallet naturally responds.

Sam Foss, a writer, and traveler discovered a rustic little house in England situated at the top of a hill. A signpost read: "Help yourself to a cool drink." Nearby he found a spring of ice-cold water. An old-fashioned dipper was hanging above the spring, and on a bench was a basket of summer apples, along with another sign inviting passersby to help themselves. Foss was curious about the people who showed such hospitality to strangers.

An elderly couple answered when he knocked at the door. Foss asked them about the well and the apples. They explained that their little plot of ground yielded a scant living, but because they were fortunate enough to have a well with abundant cold water, they wanted to share what they had with anyone who happened by. "We're too poor to give too much money away,"

said the husband, "but we thought that this would be a good way to do something for the folks who pass our way." 5⁵

It's amazing how some people who the world categorizes as smart, God sees as foolish. And how others who the world sees as foolish, God knows to be wise. Have your possessions become a spiritual problem? Are your priorities out of whack? Have you learned the spiritual principles of gratitude and generosity? Neither have any reference to the size of your bank account-- both have to do with the size of your heart. God said to the rich man, you fool! And that's exactly what he was. Don't be a fool.

1 Investopedia – article, Are You in the World's Top 1 Percent? by Daniel Kurt, September 25, 2019, found at www.investopedia.com.

2 Sojourners, March-April 2002, article titled "Jesus Visits the Hamptons," by Will Willimon, found in archives at www.sajo.net.

3 Article titled, "What would Jesus drive?' Gas-guzzling Americans are Asked," by Oliver Burkeman, published November 3, 2002. Found at www.theguardian.com.

4 Kriplen, Nancy. J. Irwin Miller – The Shaping of an American Town; Indiana University Press, 2019, quote from page 139.

5 Donald E. and Vesta W. Mansell, *Sure as The Dawn*, Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1993.

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