

## **Does this Sermon Apply to You?**

Luke 12:13-21

August 5, 2007

I would like to take you this morning to a place in your imagination. There was this fellow named Ben. Ben was the first from his family to go to college. His parents had grown up during the depression and money had been so tight, that higher education was a dream that they never were able to realize. But they made a promise to each other that their son would get the best education that was available.

Fortunately, Ben was a fine student and was admitted to the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Following graduation, he applied and was accepted to the MBA program at Harvard.

So with a brand new MBA in his pocket, he was ready to take on the world. He took a great risk and started his own company. He heard of a couple of veterinarian researchers who had developed a micro-chip which, when implanted in a pig, would transmit biological information which could then be used to design unique feeding programs for individual hogs, thus maximizing market value.

It was a great idea, but they couldn't sell it to anyone, until Ben decided to take a chance. The company exploded in growth beyond almost everyone's expectation. Almost overnight Ben became very rich. His company built a headquarters in Chicago with regional offices in Denver, Dallas, and Atlanta.

Ben collected antique automobiles, race horses, and expensive homes. In addition to his home on Chicago's Gold Coast, he had a home on Martha's Vineyard, and in Palm Beach, and a get-a-way house in the south of France.

At age 50, he had amassed a huge fortune. He was literally making money faster than he could spend it. So he decided to retire. He sold his business to an international conglomerate, put his money in a bank in the Cayman Islands, and retired to a sixty-five million dollar home just outside Nassau in the Bahamas.

The very first night in his new home, he had a dream. In the dream, he relived his whole life. He remembered college and graduate school, the early risky days of his new business, the phenomenal growth of the company, and becoming very, very rich. And then a voice said, "You're an idiot. Before the night is over, you will stand at the gates of eternity. What will you have to show for it?"

Does that sound familiar? It should if you remember the gospel lesson I read just a few short minutes ago. The headline above this parable is titled "The Greedy Farmer" in The Message. It is more commonly known as the Parable of the Rich Fool."

At this point in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is making his way slowly but surely down to Jerusalem for the final time in his life. Along the way, he drew crowds, as he always did,

to hear his preaching and teaching. One day, this guy in the crowd stood up with a really strange request. “Teacher, order my brother to give me a fair share of the family inheritance.” We all know that Jesus was a great preacher, and preachers all love an opportunity to preach. Jesus, most of all, recognized a preaching and teaching moment when it presented itself.

First he asked this guy why it was his business to interfere into individual family affairs. And then he said to the general audience, “Take care. Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”

Then he told them a story. There was a rich farmer who had been wildly successful. He discovered that his barns weren’t big enough for his harvest, so he decided to tear them down and build bigger ones. Then he would be able to sit back and retire on his earned wealth, never having to worry about finances again.

Just then, who happened to show up but God, who told the rich man that he was acting like a fool. That night, he would die. Since there are no pockets in a shroud, he couldn’t take any of his wealth with him. You have never seen a U-haul trailer hitched on to the back of a hearse. So he would be entering death the same way he entered life: naked, bald, and penniless. His relatives would be the ones who would be fighting over the will and getting his estate through probate. Jesus said, “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”

This isn’t a parable just for the rich. It is for all of us. That is the biggest problem because we can’t see ourselves in that picture. We don’t have Cayman Island bank accounts or huge estates. We like to tell ourselves that we’re not rich, when in fact; we are richer than we imagine. We have more stuff than we ever can use, and we just keep accumulating more.

Since our wedding anniversary and my birthday are only ten days apart, it is not unusual for Toni to pack in one gift to cover the two occasions. That is what she did this year. On the night before our anniversary, Dominique happened to be home for a couple of days and so we were up pretty late watching a movie that we had rented. The movie was over at about ten minutes after midnight, and I looked at Toni and said, “It is officially our anniversary. Before we go to bed, would you like your present?” She said that she would, so I brought it to her. While she opened it, I was silently considering what I was about to receive.

After she opened her present, she said, “We are going to have to go to my office to get yours. Don’t you think it is too late to do it tonight?” I of course, said no, it wasn’t too late. On our way over, she said, “I hope you won’t be disappointed because I didn’t get it wrapped.” I told her that it was OK because that would be less stuff clogging up to take the landfill.

We opened her office door and there sat my present: a new bike; all 21 speeds and a wide enough seat for a guy my age. You see, my doctor told me a year ago that I need to

lose about twenty five pounds. The good news is that in the past year, I haven't gained anything. My wife loves me and thinks that I need more exercise, thus helping me to take off some weight. So I got a new bike.

Actually, I'm in good company, or at least in a large company. Two thirds of Americans are overweight. One third of us are medically obese. We join the one third of the world's population who are well-fed, while one third is underfed, and one third is starving.

The day after our anniversary, Toni said that we had to dig out her bike, take it to the bike shop, and get it reconditioned so that we could ride together. So we went out to the shed behind the house to get it. I had forgotten that in that shed, we had four bikes in various states of disrepair. Three of them belonged to the kids and hadn't been ridden in years. They were rusty, had flat tires, and looked awful.

So we got her bike out to take to the bike shop. I then started to look through the shed. When we were married, her grandmother gave us a bed frame that she didn't need anymore. It was really old when we got it and after a few years, we replaced it with a new one. That bed, in turn, was replaced about three years ago. You guessed it; both old beds are still stored in the shed.

As I looked around, I also saw the bunk beds that our boys slept in. There was also two other old bed frames. There was an old trampoline that Dominique had been given for Christmas when she was in Middle School. There were two thirty-gallon garbage cans which were filled with old flower pots that Toni refused to throw away the last time we moved. There was an old push lawn mower that hasn't been used for a couple of years.

There was an old dressing table that my grandfather had given us before he died in 1985. Dominique left an old bookshelf that she had self-decorated and then decided that she didn't like. This doesn't count the old couch, old chairs, and old entertainment center in the basement that we don't use anymore.

I realized that I was treading on thin ice, but I asked the question anyway. "Why can't we get rid of all of this junk?" She said, "OK fine. The next time we move, we will get rid of it." Since we have no plans to move, at least in the near future, we are going to continue to add to our storage shed of stuff.

Of course, we won't talk about all the stuff I keep, because my stuff is different. I really do need two twelve-volume sets of the Interpreter's Bible. I really do need my textbooks from my college statistics class. I need those books that I had to read for my license to preach back in 1972. I need the two portable televisions that I have sitting under my desk at home. I really do need that first vinyl album of "The Monkeys" and "Ina-godda-divida" by Iron Butterfly. I really do need my tenor saxophone that I got in sixth grade and which hasn't been played for decades, Dominique's alto sax that she quit playing in Jr. High School, and the soprano sax that a friend gave me a few years back that I have never played.

As I stand before you this morning, please realize that I am preaching in a mirror. I was going to tell you that there are few of you in the congregation today who will think that this sermon applies to you. I had trouble convincing myself that it applies to me!

You have heard me preach about overindulgence before. And I'll preach it again; because we all need to hear it, and because the gospel is full of these themes. We live in a culture of overabundance. We've got so much stuff that we have to rent out storage facilities to keep all the stuff we haven't got room for in our basements, garages, or backyard sheds. We are rich. We are overweight. We have too much stuff. And we keep building bigger and bigger barns to store all our possessions.

The fact of the matter is that we – most of us anyway - are living in a bumper-crop reality. Sure, stuff happens. Sometimes life gets turned around and we struggle. But generally, we are living in a land of bumper crops. Jesus knows that our appetite for more is subtle, but strong. Somehow, we come to believe that our self-worth is determined by how much stuff we have. And we come to believe that the stuff we have is ours because we earned it or deserved it.

The problem with the rich fool in the parable is not that he was rich. The problem was that he didn't understand that behind his riches stood God. He didn't understand that he would have nothing without the grace of God working in his life.

We are going to come back to these themes in a couple of months when we begin our fall stewardship campaign. I know few people that enjoy these annual autumn sermons and rituals, but they are important. They remind us that nothing we have really belongs to us. Nothing we have is really due to our own resourcefulness or creativity or hard work. Behind it all, stands God.

I believe that we need to become better at sharing than we are at storing. Remember the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. "Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Let us remember that we are given to, so that we might give to others. We are blessed, so that we might be a blessing to others. We are loved so that we might love. We are forgiven so that we might forgive.

Let's leave the bigger barns to the fools, while we store up our treasures in heaven. We do that through giving to God our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. We can indeed, become better at sharing than at storing.