11-5/6-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 12:13-21 Possessions Obsession

The first time I moved into a parsonage, I barely had enough furniture to fill half of a small moving van.

My furniture then consisted of hand me downs, auction items and books.

Two years later, when I moved to NW Ohio, my possessions now easily filled a small moving van, as over the years I had acquired, among other things, a sleeper sofa and an upright piano.

Ten years then went quickly by. In that time I got married and had two kids. When I moved from Payne to Deshler, I was amazed that we literally had more stuff than could fit on the big truck on moving day. We had bins of baby clothes and file cabinets full of baseball cards. We had boxes and boxes of books and even unopened wedding presents.

We added another child, and then moved twice in the past three years. This time the moving company upgraded us to the full size semi! The baby clothes did not make this move, but the baseball cards did. With less than five weeks to pack this summer, boxes that were still not sorted from the past move were moved again without being opened. So our stuff—needed and unneeded, sorted and unsorted—all once again made the move.

This morning, if we were gut honest with each other, how many of us would admit that our basements and attics, our garages and storage units contain more stuff than we need? How many of us would admit that the pressure to have more, to keep up with the status quo, to possess the latest style or gadget or iphone, sometimes gets in the way of being who we are called to be? How many of us would admit that we spend more time acquiring for this life than preparing for the next life?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, know that you are not alone.

The number of self-storage units in every county shows the amount of stuff that we own. TV shows through the years have highlighted our obsession with our possessions. Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous; Extreme Couponing; American Pickers; Storage Wars. We own so much stuff that we forget what we have. Or we insist on owning more than we need.

Then there are the shows on finance and financial gurus such as Clark Howard and Suzi Orman who all assume we have financial investments for a better tomorrow and try to give us ways to weather the uncertain financial climate of today.

None of these shows, however, remind us to prepare for the ultimate reality of our lives—our deaths. None of these shows, however, remind us to live who we claim to be—disciples of Jesus. We find ourselves instead striving for that middle class American dream, focused on what we have materially and financially rather than spiritually.

How many of us desire the nice house, nice car, comfortable living lifestyle that allows us to work hard and play harder, to invest for college and retirement and to dream of a better future for the next generation?

There is nothing wrong with wanting to own your own home and drive a dependable car while having enough money to pay the bills, put food on the table and take a vacation or two a year while saving up for tomorrow.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to create a better life for yourself and for your children and grandchildren.

Our possessions only become a problem when they become the center of our lives, when we spend the majority of our time desiring and acquiring. Our possessions only become a problem when we look to them for security, believing that if we only have enough, then we will be set for now and secure for the future. Our possessions only become a problem when we give them the illusion of independence, that only through what we own can we be independent from need, from others, from God.

Yet money won’t buy happiness. Possessions won’t fill up the emptiness within. And never was a hearse seen pulling a U-Haul. The stock market can crash tomorrow. A fire can consume a house and all its contents. If our focus, security or happiness is on our possessions, what happens, then, when they are here today and gone tomorrow?

…A reporter asked a young Wall Street broker on the fast track what his chief goal was in life. "To make my first million dollars by the time I am 28," was the answer. "Then what?" the reporter continued. "Well, I suppose I would like to become a multi-millionaire." The news man pressed on. "Then what?" Beginning to get a bit irritated, the broker said, "I want to have a family and enough money to retire at 40 and travel around the world."

Do you see the next question coming? "Then what?" Exasperated, the would be multi-millionaire said, "Well, like everyone else, I guess someday I will die!" The young man's last answer begs the question – "Then what?"

 -- John Jewell “Then What?” lectionarysermons.com 8-2-98

Years ago, surrounded by a great crowd, Jesus was encouraging his disciples when someone in the crowd cried out, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” At least this young man was being honest with his desire for more than his share, for the custom of the day was that the eldest son received the bulk of the inheritance. This young man was obviously not the elder brother. He desired more, and Jesus responded first by saying he wanted no part in determining this family squabble.

Never one to miss a teaching opportunity, however, Jesus continued: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” “Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.” “Owning a lot of things won’t make your life safe.”

Notice here that Jesus is not speaking solely against the accumulation of wealth. His teaching goes deeper than that. Rich or poor, Jesus is teaching about the desire to have more, an obsession with possessions, a desire that can overwhelm and even destroy us.

..Leo Tolstoy tells the story of a man called Martin. Martin worked in a factory in town, but he also had a small farm of 30 acres where he grew vegetables that he and his wife would sell at a roadside stand. Martin would get up in the morning to work on his farm, go into town to work at the factory, then come home and work on the farm till nightfall. At night, as they sat to eat dinner, Martin's wife would say to him, "Martin, we are most fortunate that our vegetables grow so well. People buy everything we grow."

But Martin was not satisfied. He wanted more land. Shortly afterward Martin borrowed some money and bought another 30 acres next to his property. He still kept his job at the factory and now worked longer into the night to have a prosperous crop for his roadside stand. One night after returning late from the fields Martin's wife said, "Martin, God has been good to us. The warm sun and the abundant rainfall have filled our stand, and still the people buy all we grow."

But Martin was not satisfied. He wanted more land. Soon afterward Martin was able to buy another 140 acres for his farm. He quit his job at the factory so he could work full time on the farm. But even though he worked full time—there were not enough hours of the day to get everything done. When he and his wife would have time to talk to one another she would say, "Who could be more fortunate than we Martin? Our fields are full and we sell everything we grow."

But Martin was not satisfied. Soon Martin was able to buy another 250 acres of land. He closed his roadside stand, hired people to help out and manage the farm. He built refrigerated storage buildings to store his crops.

His wife worked on the books. When they would go out for dinner she would say to him, "God is good to us, Martin. There is nothing we lack."

But Martin was not satisfied. "I do not have enough land," he would say. "If I could buy land south of here, we could grow crops that our climate will not allow." Soon Martin was able to buy 300 acres of land in the south.

He began commuting between farms and working long hours on weekends. After a very long day, Martin suffered a heart attack and died. He was buried in a small cemetery plot, seven feet long, four feet wide, and six feet deep. That was just enough land!

 --William White, Speaking in Stories, pp. 112-113

 Told by David Leininger “It’s Not the Money…” 4-30-06

Martin is much like the farmer in today’s parable from Jesus.

A rich man’s fields yielded an abundant harvest. The man had no place to store this abundance and determined what to do. He said, “I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.”

That in and of itself is not the problem. The problem is what the rich man decided to do next.

He then said, “And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.’” But that very night God demanded his soul. The rich fool stored up things on earth without regard toward others or toward God.

In Jesus’ day, in Jewish society, “to own property was a gift from God and, thus, a sacred responsibility.”

Since all property belonged to God, one did not farm merely for oneself. When you were entrusted with caring for the land, you also were then responsible for caring for the community. To be a farmer was a communal commitment, not a sole occupation.

Think back to the Old Testament examples we have of this sacred responsibility. Joseph stored up grain in Egypt in order to feed everyone in the coming years of famine. Boaz left a part of the harvest in the field for the poor to glean, and that is how Ruth cared for herself and Naomi. To care for the poor within the community was Jewish law, let alone love for neighbor.

In and of itself, what the farmer did was a prudent thing to do—he stored his excess instead of wasting it, preparing for a year of drought or famine. But the farmer’s attitude is what makes him a fool. He stored his excess not with others in mind, but for his own greed and enjoyment. He did not consider his crops a sacred communal responsibility, but an opportunity to get ahead.

Notice how many times the possessive pronouns “I, me or mine” creep up in the parable of the rich fool.

“What shall I do?” This is what I’ll do. I will tear down… I will build bigger…I will store my surplus.” “Then I will eat, drink and be merry.”

..A schoolboy once was asked what parts of speech ‘my’ and ‘mine’ are. The schoolboy answered, “Aggressive pronouns.”

 --William Barclay

Jesus is speaking out here against a skewed priority that places our possessions in the place of God. He is speaking out against a life focused on the accumulation of stuff, materially or financially, without regard to our relationships with God and with one another, in this life and in the life to come.

“No one on his deathbed ever said, ‘I wish I had spent more time on my business.’”

The late Senator Paul Tsongas made this quote famous when he wrote a book reflecting on his cancer diagnosis and decision to leave the Senate and spend his time with his family.

--quote from Arnold Zack in “Heading Home” by Paul Tsongas, p. 160

If we were given 30 days to live, if we were given 24 hours to live, how would we live differently? Would the stuff around us really matter? Or would our relationships become our priority, time spent with God, time spent with God’s promises in His Word, time spent with family and close friends?

Many candles are lit today on this table in memory of family members. What would they say to us now, if they could, about how we spend our lives, about how to live by faith, about the order of our priorities? What witness did they give to life and love in the days, months, or years before their death, especially if they battled against illness for some time?

When I served at the Leipsic Parish, one of my fellow pastors was diagnosed with cancer, and battled for almost a year before she died. I will always remember her saying that one good thing that came about from her cancer treatments was a refocus of her priorities, where faith came first and where family finally was put ahead of the church.

If we were given 30 days to live, how would we live differently? Would the stuff around us really matter?

We are not called, as individuals and even as a congregation, to fatten our checkbooks with a rainy day fund which never gets used, to build a bigger building in order to brag about our accomplishments or thinking that if we build it, others will flock to it, or to personally take all of the credit for our lives.

As individuals and as congregations, we are called to be more concerned with our relationships than our bottom lines, to reorient the center of our lives around God and not what we own or what we desire.

We are called, as individuals and as congregations, to be faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to us.

We are called to be faithful trustees of our finances and our faith stories, our skills and our stuff, managing it all according to God’s ways and utilizing it all for the glory of God.

We are called, as individuals and as congregations, to live in this life always with eternity in mind, and allow our relationships with God and others to influence what we own rather than to allow what we own to influence our relationships with God and with others.

.. The Bible is consistent in the theme that:

we are given to — so that we might give to others;

we are blessed — so that we might be a blessing;

we are loved — so that we might love;

we are reconciled — so that we might reconcile;

we are forgiven — so that we might forgive.

The problem with greed and accumulation is that rich fools — then and now — forget that blessings are intended to be used to bless others.

 --“Rich Fools” homileticsonline.com 8-5-07

Jesus is not judging us in this passage—he is warning us, he is teaching us, he is preparing us to live by God’s eternal values rather than society’s earthly values. Since we can’t take any of it with us to heaven, and since focusing on ourselves rather than on God can have eternal consequences, we need to take a good hard look at what we do with our obsession with our possessions. Do we deal with what we own responsibly or carelessly? Do we hoard it or give much of it away? Do we honor God with it or flaunt who we are with it?

..John G. Wendel and his sisters were some of the most miserly people of all time. Although they had received a huge inheritance from their parents, they spent very little of it and did all they could to keep their wealth for themselves. John was able to influence five of his six sisters never to marry, and they lived in the same house in New York City for 50 years. When the last sister died in 1931, her estate was valued at more than $100 million.

Her only dress was one that she had made herself, and she had worn it for 25 years. The Wendels had such a compulsion to hold on to their possessions that they lived like paupers.

 --Daily Walk, 6-2-93. Sermonillustrations.com:money

How much they were like the rich fool of today’s parable.

Life is not about all of the stuff we have but life is about who we are. And we are beloved children of God called to follow Christ. We are followers of Christ called to live with eternity in mind.

Even in the daily pursuit of work and pleasure may we not find ourselves consumed by greed, obsessed with owning more. Rather, may we find ourselves consumed by the love of God, joyfully sharing what we have with others because of what God has shared with us.

As we move this week from All Saints weekend to Stewardship Weekend,

I invite you to consider your possessions and your priorities:

Look around your house this week—what are three things you can give away? Find them and do it.

Look through your calendar this week—where is the pursuit of things interfering with your relationships?

Find one hour that you can spend with people who matter to you and do it.

Look through your spending this week—what is one luxury that you can stop purchasing in order to better use that money in another way? Figure out how those dollars add up and consider intentional ways to give it to ministry or missions.

Look through your heart this week— Have you been putting off any thought of eternity, feeling like you always have tomorrow to get right with God? Admit your selfishness, confess your faith in Jesus, and be prepared for eternal life now in case you have no more tomorrows in this life.

May we stop obsessing over what we have or don’t have, in order to trust in the One whom we know holds our future. May we store up riches toward God rather than earthly riches this day and every day. May we honor God with all that we are, all that we have, and in all that we do.

May it be so. Let us pray.