**“The Path to Joy”**

**Greedy 🡪 Grateful**

OT 32C-22

Luke 12: 13-21

Nov. 6, 2022

**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 Path to Joy”

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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 the mouth of Jesus himself. In fact, “nearly one third” of Jesus’ parables address the topic of wealth in one way or another.[[1]](#footnote-1) So if it seems like we read a lot of Bible passages that pertain 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 God, and you can’t go wrong.”

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Now before I go any further, I need to come clean about this. I try to believe Jesus when he teaches that where my heart is there my treasure will be. I try to 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 try to believe that.

But I still struggle with it.

* Call me frugal or cheap. I like to save.
* Call me vain or proud—I also like earthly things.

After all, I’m inundated… inundated every day with marketers, neighbors, politicians telling me that money should be my primary concern.

I’m immersed within a society that teaches me to judge others based on how much wealth they have or don’t have… and that there are these things or signs to use—like the size of one’s home… or the emblem on one’s car… or the designer’s name on one’s shirt or handbag… that reveal something of the wealth and worth other people have.

So it’s not uncommon… on occasion… that I’ll find myself daydreaming about what it would be like to have a bigger bank account… to suddenly win the lottery (which would be really impressive if I did win because I never play it).

Do you ever catch yourself doing that? It’s fun to fantasize… about what you could buy. What you could give away or accomplish. To wonder how much easier—perhaps even happier—life might be with millions of dollars.

Because that’s what all the so-called experts tell us, right? That money and happiness correlate to each other. That money and success are synonymous with each other.

But that’s only the half of it. On top of these fantasies of having more, I also admit that, on occasion, I get anxious tihnking 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 and happy, the so-called-political and marketing experts are also constantly telling me that we live in an economy of scarcity—that there isn’t enough to go around of this thing that supposedly 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 the same bogus claims of what defines success and what makes for security and happiness.

So like me, when Jesus says “Money doesn’t make the world go round,” I suspect you, too, want to believe him. I mean, we get the point he’s trying to make. God rules our world—not the Almighty Dollar.

But let’s all be real about this… If you look at the way we spend and save and seek more for ourselves… versus the way we use what we have to share… what does it look like we worship? God or money? What do our checking accounts reveal? What does our schedule reveal?

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

The struggle is true for the church, as well. While I am continually proud and impressed with the Session and leadership of our church… While I am grateful for what I believe is their very faithful approach to our church’s moneys and resources… While we try hard *not* to let the financial bottom line dictate the decisions we make as a church… The truth is… money can and does come into play.

When you spend more than you take in—as we tend to do—it’s almost impossible for money not to be a significant factor when discerning how we’re going to live into the priorities God puts before us, even though Jesus says God—and our love for God and God’s love for us—should reside at the center of our decisions… *nothing* else.

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Now… all this shared, I want to be clear what this does *not* mean. This does NOT mean money is bad. Jesus never said that money is evil or sinful. So it’s not a sin to have money. Or earn it. Or spend it.

Rather, Jesus is clear that money has no inherent moral value at all. How could it? Money is just a resource. A tool we can use to build wonderful realities.

But, like all tools, it can also 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. But how we view it. How we value it. How we prioritize it within our lives. How we let it shape us… consume us. *That’s* the issue in our gospel lesson this morning. Not money itself. But our thirst for it. And the way in which money so often correlates with one of the most dangerous powers we face in this world. Namely… **our greed**.

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Our lesson begins with an all-too-familiar scene. A family dispute over—what else—money. Two brothers have lost their father. But rather than consoling each other amid their grief, they’re at each other’s throats over the inheritance. One of them assumes Jesus would take his side. “Teacher,” he says, “tell my selfish brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

But Jesus couldn’t care less about the concern. “You’re kidding me, right? Your father has just died and you’re asking me to play judge over something as vain as your inheritance?”

But lest we think there’s something wrong with passing on an inheritance, Jesus goes on to explain that his objection doesn’t have anything to do with passing money down from one generation to the next, but with their basic idolatry of money in the first place. He explains it with a parable.

“There was this really rich guy who owned a tremendous amount of land that produced beautiful, bountiful harvests. In fact, his harvests were so overflowing with blessings that his barns couldn’t hold all it produced.

“So the rich man asked himself, “What am I gonna do with this incredible harvest?”

He thought… and he thought… and he thought… until he answered himself, “I know what I’ll do! I’ll tear down the barns I already have, and build even bigger barns to store it all. And then… at last… 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 going to die tonight, and *this* is what you’re worried about?! How to have more? How to hoard your blessings for *yourself*?! You think that’s what life is all about?”

Jesus then summed it up, saying “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 implied it was wrong for the rich man in the parable to celebrate a bountiful harvest.

Rather, Jesus labeled the rich man a fool because he fundamentally misunderstood the things that make for real wealth—real abundance—in the first place. He’s a fool for doing what we all so often do—falling prey to greed—as his desire for more prevented him from celebrating and appreciating all that he already had.

While there’s nothing in the parable to indicate this guy was a jerk like the classic Dickens’ character (we shared during our Children’s Message), Ebeneezer Scrooge… the man in this parable certainly lived an equally tragic life. He was so focused on getting and storing more for himself that he completely failed to eat, drink… celebrate and live in the here and now.

So Jesus warned the brother, “Take Care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

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It’s the reason he spoke so often about money. **Not because money is bad… but because our idolization of it is…** as our individual and societal hunger for more creates appetites within us that make greed seem normal. Even healthy.

* Even though greed always insists… “there will never be enough.”
* Even though greed always implores… “save more because you might run out.”
* Even though greed will never, ever let you rest… greed will never let you take stock of all the blessings you *already* have… so that you can appreciate the joy and gifts that are yours to celebrate here and now.

Greed tells us to never do that.

And yet, as Jesus explained in the beautiful prose following the parable… if we truly trust in God to provide our daily bread… if we make the effort to look for God’s love and care for us… If we strive to trust Jesus’ words, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”… then how much more of life could we live? How much more of life could we see… and taste… and share… and celebrate?

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It’s why Jesus spends so much of the gospel warning against greed… and inviting us into a life based in gratitude. Gratitude not in the sense of simply saying thanks for something you’re handed… but gratitude that stems from seeing the whole of life—all of it—as the gift of God it is. That’s grace, after all—receiving a gift we didn’t create or earn… but receive just the same.

And it’s the very foundation of the life of discipleship.

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A few years ago, one of my favorite Christian authors, Diana Butler Bass, wrote a book about this relationship between grace and gratitude, simply titled *Grateful*. And in an interview about the book, Diana shared the following reflection:

*A friend of mine recently went through a painful personal crisis… as he realized that he did not understand the meaning or purpose of his own life…*

*After many long talks about faith, I finally gave him a small book of gratitude quotes…*

*A couple days later, he texted me a quote from the book that had spoken to him: "God, help me to quiet my noisy, worrisome mind in my ordinary world. Help me to relax in the familiar and to be aware of and appreciate it."*

*“Help me to relax in the familiar and to be aware of it and to appreciate it.”*

Diana noted,

“*Of all the possible quotes in the book for him to choose, this one surprised me. I (would’ve) expected something more straightforward, perhaps comforting words about gifts and abundance. But his quote was a prayer: "God, help me." With what? "To relax in the familiar and to be aware of and appreciate it." My friend was not asking for a dramatic healing… or for God to fix his problems. He wanted to see the world around him more fully and deeply, to develop greater awareness, and to be grateful for what was already there.*

She went on:

*That is what a practice of gratitude comes to. All around us, every day, there are gifts. Whether we are facing a crisis or not, no matter our challenges or feelings, there are gifts, most of which go unnoticed, unappreciated… Sometimes they take us by surprise—we experience the "aha" of being helped, or we suddenly see a beautiful sunset, and gratitude wells up in our being. Gifts (can) spring upon us like an epiphany…*

*But if we cultivate our awareness to see those gifts more often, with clearer and more consistent vision, something else happens. Thankfulness becomes more habitual, a regular part of how we respond to the world. Yes, gratitude still holds the power to surprise and to elicit a strong emotional response. (But), as a habit, it also becomes a steadying companion, (emerging) as a daily—even hourly—(attitude) of appreciation toward familiar gifts, including the tailwinds of blessing.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

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Quite simply, friends… gratitude… the practice of looking for and giving thanks for the gifts that are around us… even within us… gifts we didn’t create ourselves but have received just the same… this practice of gratitude is not only our greatest antidote to greed… it is also our surest path into seeing… and finally living the fullness of life God yearns for us to live. *Thanks* be to God. Amen.

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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Diana Butler Bass: Choosing Gratitude as a Way of Life | Day 1](https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004236/diana_butler_bass_choosing_gratitude_as_a_way_of_life) https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004236/diana\_butler\_bass\_choosing\_gratitude\_as\_a\_way\_of\_life [↑](#footnote-ref-2)