

Luke 12.13-21
Psalm 63:1-8
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Being Rich

I'd like to draw your attention to the title of my sermon: "Being Rich." Note that I didn't title the sermon "Getting Rich." You'll have to go to some other church for the getting rich sermon. Today we're talking about being rich.

Some people get all nervous when the preacher starts to talk about money—and its corollary: possessions (and its contemporary corollary: high credit limits). Some people want us to stick to spiritual things and leave their wallets out of it. I think people are afraid we're going to say, "If you're a follower of Jesus, it's a sin to have money or possessions." But Jesus didn't said that. He does warn us about the seductive power of money and possessions and cautions us about getting too enamored of them. That's really what our story is about this morning.

A certain woman went on-line to buy an iPod. She had resisted for many years, not seeing a need to own one more piece of technology. But one day she thought how nice it would be to be able to listen to music anywhere she wanted and she thought about how much she could learn by listening to podcasts of NPR programs and so she decided she could indeed benefit from owning an iPod. And so she placed her order.

And when the iPod arrived, it was indeed lovely to behold and she listened to her music and grew smarter with every podcast. And she loaded all the CDs she owned onto her iPod and marveled at how she could take all of her music with her wherever she went.

But then one day she thought about how enjoyable it would be to listen to her iPod with others and so she began to desire external speakers and one day, for her birthday, they were given to her.

And as she played her music and grew smarter and enjoyed listening to music with others, she noticed that her iPod was beginning to be scratched and she desired to have a case in which to place her iPod to protect it from the harshness of the world. And so she searched and searched until she found exactly the right case in which to protect her iPod. And she bought it.

One day she was listening to a fascinating NPR podcast and she was startled to hear that her hearing could be damaged from the iPod ear buds which sat inside her ears streaming forth lovely music and intellectual podcasts. She moved quickly to save her hearing and purchased a pair of headphones which sat on the outside of her ears and now she could again listen, without worry, to her beloved iPod.

And she did love her iPod and the music and words it brought to her. Especially on long flights or leisurely afternoons in the backyard. But sometimes, in a quiet moment, she wondered if her original, simple desire to listen to music made her life a whole lot more complicated.

Can you relate to that? It's not that an iPod is a bad thing or it's wrong to own one but you see how you can get started with one thing and then you need all kinds of other things to go with it.

And that's true not just if you have an iPod. It happens when you have a car or a house, or a hobby or you buy clothes or books or you camp or hike or play sports or whatever else. If nothing else, the more stuff you have, the more space you need to store all the stuff. That's the dilemma the man in the parable had. He had all those goods and in order to store them he had to fill up his backyard with a swarm of those POD storage units. (Or he needed to move in with Martha Stewart who lives in a home with a 2600 square foot basement.)

My friend who got an iPhone was showing it to me the other day and he said "Look! Everything we worship, right here: a calendar, stock reports, weather, a clock, a calculator, internet connection and, oh yes, a phone."

Now all that stuff can be great. It can make our lives easier, more fun, we can learn things, go new places, experience the world in a different way. But it can also be a burden because isn't it so true that the minute we start down the road of wanting and acquiring one thing, then there are accessories to go along with it, or one bigger, or one with more features, or there's a series or a collection of whatever it is.

There was a New Yorker cartoon a while back: Two people are sitting on the couch. They look they're getting to know each other. They are each holding a glass of wine. One says to the other, "I don't want to be defined by who I am." [do I need to repeat it so people get it?]

That person is in luck because most of the time we let ourselves be defined by everything other than who we are—and I mean who we are at the core of ourselves. We're defined by our education (whether you have it or not), where we live, what kind of work we do, our bank account balance, our physical and mental health, our accumulation of stuff (whether it's a lot or a little). Those definitions spin around us whether we're living in a big mansion or whether we're living on the streets. Sometimes we define ourselves in these different ways and sometimes others define us these ways.

But here's the good news: Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

That's good news no matter if we have only a little—because Jesus says life is not about our race to get all those things. And it's good news if we have a lot of things—because at some point we come to the jolting realization that all that stuff doesn't fill the hole inside of us (even though the stuff can cover over that hole for a long, long time).

What fills that hole, what makes our lives matter, is being rich toward God. The rich man in Jesus' parable stored up all his wealth and then he died. And he is called a fool. He was a fool because he didn't know what was really true. He didn't know that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. He thought he and his stuff was all he needed.

What he really needed was to be rich toward God.

Now what does that mean? I'd say it means filling our lives with the things of God. Being rich in what God is rich in: compassion, love, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, justice. Being rich toward God is being filled with the things that matter to God. And what does Jesus tell us really matters to God? The two greatest things we can do, Jesus says, are to love God with everything in us and love others as we love ourselves. Or as the prophet Micah says, "What does God require? To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6.8)

When we're focused on being rich toward God, we'll have a lot less energy to worry about whether we have enough stuff, if our possessions have the right accessories, if they're safe, if we need more storage or stronger locks.

If the man in the parable had been rich toward God he probably would have been filled with gratitude for all that God had provided and he would have been thinking about how he could share with others the blessing of abundance he had received from God. Maybe those things used to be part of his life but as his wealth grew and he had more to manage and protect, he began to forget that all of life is a gift from God and he began to believe, falsely, that he'd gotten all he'd gotten with his own abilities.

It's an easy trap to fall into. But Jesus sets us free: Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. May we live in that freedom and be rich toward God.