

*Come Spirit of Christ – open our ears, open our minds, open our hearts; Living God, speak to us.
Amen.*

Not all of Jesus’ parables resonate with us – few of us own vineyards,
or keep sheep or deal with dishonest employees. But this one?
I think we can all relate to the impulse to have and store more than we need.
In a country with numerous TV shows on hoarding, whose landscapes are
disfigured by row upon row of storage facilities, we need to hear this story and
Jesus’ words: *“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;
a person’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

Really? We live in a culture where advertisers, economists, politicians convey the
message that that is exactly who our life is to be measured – by who much we
can acquire and keep; the one with the most toys at the end of the game wins.
Only Jesus says no. The game ends, it doesn’t matter how much you’ve collected.
Because you can’t use it, and you can’t take it with you. And if it’s not cash,
your kids may not want it either. But we’re hardwired to accumulate.

There was a rich man. Maybe you know him. He wasn’t born rich, but well off.
Well enough to be educated in good schools and make some good connections.
He had the brains to do well in those schools and the charm to cultivate those
connections. He got a good job out of college with a brokerage firm,
good salary, moved up the ladder... married, had a few kids.
He was very creative at making money - hedge fund manager, big estate,
kids in private schools. Had landscapers put in a magazine-worthy garden.
Worked hard, played hard. But every once in awhile, he’d catch sight of himself
in a mirror and think, “What is this for? What good is it?”
So he got on a couple of charity boards; used his business mind to help
non-profits be more effective – got his name in the paper a lot.
But he still felt kind of empty. He invested in a vineyard, got involved in making
wine. Drank a fair amount of it too. But it didn’t fill the vacuum.
He had a few affairs – a man with his power, wealth and looks does not lack for
women wanting to get close. But no one got close to his heart.
His heart? He wasn’t even close to his heart – he’d kind of forgotten he had one.
As he grew older, he realized that all this stuff he had accumulated and built
wasn’t going to keep him alive forever – and none of it was with him when he died.

In fact, it was probably going to be squandered by his kids and his employees, none of whom had a dime's worth of sense. What the hell was the point?

There was a woman who grew up poor, and she was determined to leave that life behind. She was gifted too – she didn't go to good schools, but she managed to get into a state college and worked her way through cleaning houses.

One day she arrived at a house she'd never cleaned before – she had never seen a house that big and beautiful.

"How do I get me one of these?" she asked the owner.

"Put yourself first," he said. "Pay yourself the first 10 percent of every dollar you earn. Save it. You'll get there."

From that day on, her dream was to save enough money to buy a house like that. And in about ten years, she did. Then she got a bigger one.

She got herself a better job, and worked up, never staying long at any one company, always looking for the better shot.

She knew no one was going to give her anything; she had to get it herself.

And she did. Devoted her life to it. Saved most of everything she earned.

After she had enough to buy her third dream house, she still kept saving.

After awhile, she didn't even know anymore for what. Just to have the security.

She was often approached by people involved in charitable organizations – people asking her to support anti-poverty programs, people wanting to make improvements in the inner-city neighborhood she came from – but she never wrote a check for more than \$50.

"Pay yourself first," was the advice she'd been given, and she kept to it.

Only in her fifties, when she was a millionaire several times over, did she begin to spend any money. She said to herself, "I've got enough money to be secure for awhile. Maybe I'll start to have a little fun."

So she went on a cruise,

bought a vacation home on the water, decorated it lavishly,

threw some \$20,000 parties... and three months later died of an aneurism.

She didn't have a will; her few relatives got a little bit of money; the state got most.

Do these people sound familiar? The first man is not unlike the man who wrote Ecclesiastes, certainly one of the most depressing books in all the Bible!

The woman in the second story bears more than a passing resemblance to the rich man Jesus told the parable about. They have a lot in common.

They are both convinced that they have achieved their own success.

They're both committed to saving for themselves, though the Jewish and Christian traditions call us to set aside the first fruits of our income for God's work.

They're both living like this world is all there is,
with no reference to God or the life of the spirit.
And thus they are both trapped by greed, which Paul defines as "idolatry."

Idolatry is ascribing ultimate worth, worship, giving power to something that is creature, not Creator. We are all vulnerable to idolatry; it's human nature. Not everyone puts wealth or material comfort on the altar – you can worship power, efficiency, the arts or an artist, an athlete, your spouse or grandchildren. We tip from a healthy enjoyment of some good into idolatry when our sense of well-being becomes connected to our experience of that object or person. Idolatry is the fuel that runs the advertising business – it invites us to invest our faith in a product or process or lifestyle that gives us a sense of being okay – that bids us focus on that thing we think we need, and we turn our gaze away from the source of all these good gifts, God himself.

It is a tricky balance we are invited to live in this world, my friends. God has given us good things – material blessings, work, families, ministries – and God wants us to enjoy them. But not to confuse the gifts with the Giver. God wants us to use the things of this earth, which God has provided us with, but to hold them lightly, not to try to possess them or claim credit for them. Notice in the Jesus' parable he says, "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop." The man claimed that crop was his own effort, when it was a gift.

We get into trouble when we stop being community, and start being consumers. The consumer mentality looks to get the best deal for me, the lowest price – forgetting that the lowest price may result from underpaid workers in dangerous conditions, from practices that degrade people and the planet. The consumer mentality puts our focus on what we lack, what we need, rather than on what we can give.

I recently read about a book called *The Abundant Community*, which argues that our culture has shifted from what the authors call a "citizen-based society" to "consumer-based cubby holes."

They say, and here I quote the Rev. Gretchen Sanders Grimshaw¹, "we are no longer a society that values our own agency as creative, connected neighbors and friends who have the will and the means to provide a satisfactory life for

¹ <https://www.episcopalct.org/an-old-remedy-for-a-new-cure/>

ourselves and our loved ones by working together to support and nourish each other. Now, we are becoming consumers who live isolated, alienated lives that are measured primarily by our purchasing power.”

Grimshaw goes on, “The shift from citizenship to consumerism has led to a fundamental shift in our general perception about the quality and fullness of our lives. It’s a shift from a feeling of abundance to a dread of scarcity. Citizenship is grounded in the notion that there is enough for everyone. But consumerism operates in a world that is grounded in the notion that there is *not* enough for everyone; a world that is predicated on supply and demand. As a society, we have traded lives of abundance grounded in community for lives of scarcity grounded in purchase-power; from communities of citizens who are connected to each other for the greater good into buyers and sellers of commodities for personal satisfaction.”

I quote this at length because she’s on to something important.

Jesus called to his followers to live simply and care for poor. Poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times in the Bible. Jesus is fierce he’s talking about the poor. As Christians we are called to ask think when we contemplate a purchase, whether it’s a \$4.00 latte or a \$30,000 car.

And God also calls his church to model abundant community, where people care for one another materially and spiritually, where no one is in need and no one has too much.

I believe our call goes beyond modeling abundant community to helping to foster it wherever we can. That is part of our vision to foster equity and justice as we connect people with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus.

Take your hand. Clench it up, like you have to hold on to what you have.

Do you have any room to receive? Now, open your hand, let the tension flow out.

Add the other one. Here we are, God, ready to receive Your gifts, to trust You.

If you don’t want to live like this (*clenched*), learn to live like this (*open*.)

We’ll be amazed at the life that flows into us. *Amen*.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! **Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.**"

And he told them this parable: "The **ground** of a certain rich man **produced** a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, '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 ' "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. **Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?**' "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14, 2:1-7, 11, 18-23

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

I thought in my heart, "Come now, **I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.**" But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with **wine**, and embracing **folly**--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. I undertook **great projects**: I built **houses** for myself and planted **vineyards**. I made **gardens** and **parks** and planted all kinds of **fruit trees** in them. I made **reservoirs** to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female **slaves** and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more **herds** and **flocks** than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. **So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.** For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.