

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA July 31, 2016

Luke 12: 13-21

It's All About Me, Isn't It?

Hymns: 232 – 482 – 389 – 360 – 293

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

¹³ *Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”*

¹⁴ *Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”* ¹⁵ *Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”*

¹⁶ *And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’*

¹⁸ *“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’*

²⁰ *“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?’*

²¹ *“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”*

In the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord, dear friends:

.....Some twenty years ago, I came upon a poem that went like this:

“I had a little tea party this afternoon at three. ‘Twas very small, three guests in all— just I, myself and me. Myself ate all the sandwiches, while I drank up the tea,

‘twas also I who ate the pie, and passed the cake to me.”

The poem has stuck with me all these years perhaps because of its tongue-in-cheek lesson on selfishness. But there is nothing tongue-in-cheek about the lesson on this same subject which Jesus delivers in our text today. Today we listen to His word to everyone who thinks to himself or herself, “It’s my tea party, my life,

“It’s All About Me, Isn’t It?”

I. Greed is natural to us all

A man has come to Jesus with a special request: **“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me”** (v.13). This unidentified man wants Jesus to settle a quarrel between himself and his brother regarding their father’s estate. Did he not hear what Jesus just said? In the preceding verses the Lord said if God takes care of the sparrows, can we not count on Him to take care of us, who are worth much more than many sparrows? But this man is so consumed by the thought that he has been treated unfairly by his father and brother that he has heard nothing Jesus said. He is like people who sit in church worrying about their problems while the pastor preaches on the words of Peter, **“Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you”** (1 Pe.5:7).

Jesus went right to the heart of this man’s problem, which was not the division of that inheritance, but the greed in this man’s heart. **“Watch out!”** Jesus warns. **“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”** (v.15). Two points are made here that I want you to keep in mind because we will be coming back to them: first, greed comes in a variety of styles; and second, life is not about the toys, the treasures, and the accumulation of *things*. To drive these points home, Jesus tells a parable.

“The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop” (v.16). That’s good, isn’t it? It was not wrong that this man was rich nor that he had a bumper crop on his hands. There is no hint that he came by his wealth illegally or at the expense of others. He didn’t kill his neighbor, as King Ahab did in order to claim Naboth’s vineyard. This farmer is your hard-working, honest, respected-in-the-community kind of fellow. Jesus wants us to see this man as someone very much like any one of us in order that we may appreciate how common greed is in every one of us.

On the surface there isn’t anything wrong with the man’s plans. It’s been a good year — so good that he doesn’t have room for the bumper harvest he’s pulling in. So he sits down to draw up a plan. And that’s just good business, good stewardship. But selfishness, even in its most innocent looking form, has its own language. That’s the give-away in the

parable. Selfishness loves the personal pronouns *me*, *myself* and *I*. So Jesus permits us to listen in to the man's thoughts, to hear them as God would. "*What shall I do? This is what I'll do ... And I'll say to myself...*" Twelve times in this conversation with himself the man uses the words *I* or *my*. Rather than thank God for his "problem," his chief concern is how he can keep it all for himself. And despite the extra work this bumper crop has made for him, he wouldn't think of changing places with the poor farmer down the road, nor could he imagine giving his excess away.

Rich farmers haven't cornered the market on greed. Greed lives not only on Rodeo Drive in Hollywood or along Wall Street, New York City; greed also lives in the homes of middle-class Americans and in the shacks of the poor of Appalachia. Greed lives in our children as they fight over possession of a Tonka truck or a Barbie doll or scream their *wants* at us in a store. Greed takes possession of us when the personal pronoun dominates our life, when I live as if it's all about me. "*I plan to retire young. I will enjoy the good life. I will travel, do whatever I want. That's what life is about, being happy, right?*"

There are "*all kinds of greed*," as Jesus reminds us. Greed accounts for most credit card debt. We overextend ourselves because our wants are greater than our means. We know this, but the possessive pronoun in me still demands that item now, not later. Greed may exhibit itself in how we think of time, as in how I will spend *my* weekend, or *my* time-off. And while it may be fun to fantasize what we would do if we won the Powerball or big money on *Wheel of Fortune*, how greedy we really are shows up not in what we *would* do, but in what we *actually do* with that tax refund we receive, or with an unexpected bonus from work or from an inheritance. If we are honest, we must confess that we are more like the man in Jesus' parable than we may have realized. The possessive pronoun often dominates and directs our motives and attitudes. And Satan will do all he can to continue to cultivate the spirit of greed and selfishness in us. He will make it seem so innocent, so natural to ask yourself what you want from life. Greed pretends to be serving your best interests, looking after you, but it is destructively deceptive.

II. Greed is destructively deceptive

When the American West was opened to settlement by the 1862 Homestead Act, the Oklahoma Land Race and other land giveaways, one territory offered land on the basis of how much a person could walk around in a single day. The only rule was that the walker had to be back at his starting point before the sun set. One man started out at the crack of dawn. As he walked and marked his territory with stakes, he

was amazed at the richness of the land soon to be his. In fact, he became so enthralled with what would soon be his that he walked farther and farther out to claim more of the land. By mid-afternoon he realized he might not get back to his starting point in time, and if not, he would have nothing! So he walked faster, then he began to run. By the time he topped the last hill, he was gasping for breath, but he made it. Before the sun set he crossed his starting point. Exhausted, the man reveled in his triumph, imagining the extent of his new wealth. Just then he felt a sharp pain in his chest and a tingling in his arms and legs. The pain shot through his entire body. A fearful look of realization showed in his eyes. A moment later he was dead of a heart attack. Oh, he got the land he wanted, only not very much of it. They gave him a plot 3 feet wide by 7 feet long by 6 feet deep in which he was buried.

The rich man in Jesus' parable got exactly the same. He thought he had years ahead to enjoy himself; but God measured his life in hours. A fool, Jesus called him, because he made no provision for the future of his soul. A fool because that night he would stand in God's court spiritually bankrupt. A fool because this sin of greed would send his soul to hell.

Mark Jesus' words, my friends, for this is a dangerously deceptive sin. When *me*, *myself* and *I* take charge of our life, the Lord who has so richly blessed us, is inevitably pushed aside. Then, one day, the One we had no time for here, will have no place for us with Him. Jesus is speaking to each one of us also when He concludes, "*This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God*" (v.21).

III. Needs to be curbed and cured

To avoid an end like that of the man in Jesus' parable the Lord would have us ask, "what does it mean to be '*rich toward God*' and when is a person '*rich toward God*'?" St. Paul probably explained it best when he said, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me*" (Gal.2:19-20). Paul spoke from personal experience. He had not been rich toward God. He had tried to be rich in himself. His life rotated around those three pronouns, *me*, *myself* and *I* as he sought to rise in the elite circle of the Pharisees. But then the day came that his life completely changed course. Call it his conversion, an awakening, a rebirth — but it meant that Jesus Christ was now in charge in Paul's life. Through faith in Christ, Paul discovered what it meant to be rich in God. He learned that Jesus loved Paul even though Paul was persecuting those who followed Jesus. Jesus gave Himself for Paul in death upon a cross. He was given a wealth that consisted of a full pardon for his

sins, peace with God, and the prospect of eternal salvation. All this came to Paul from the Son of God who, as Paul says, ***“loved me and gave Himself for me”*** (Gal.2:20).

Jesus has given the same gift to every one of us. Jesus is the counterpart of the rich man in the parable. Jesus gave up the riches of heaven and became poor, so that through His poverty He might make all of us rich — truly rich with God’s forgiveness of our sins. You see, as the Son of God, He and He alone could pay the price required for our sins. And Jesus made that decision to take every sinner’s place and die our death and suffer the hell that should have been ours so that we could be forgiven. I can’t imagine a greater love than that. Jesus loved me, enough to live and die for one who fails Him countless times. Jesus loves each one of you, no matter what you have done or how selfish you have been. Can you imagine a love greater than that?

This, then, is what it means to be ***“rich toward God.”*** It means first of all to believe in Christ and trust in the One who earned those riches for us on that cross. And the more we live in the riches of His love, the more we will fall out of love with me, myself and I. It is this faith and love which then becomes the lens through which we see life, the glasses that bring everything into correct focus.

People who have such a rich connection to God through Jesus Christ know that the good life can be found only in Him. They know that sound sleep does not come from a firm mattress and silk sheets. They know that true security does not depend on the amount one has stashed away in barns or banks, but rests on the goodness and mercy of God. God’s children understand that our possessions are gifts from God, not merely to be possessed by us, not just to be used only for our own pleasure, but for God’s glory and in service to our neighbor. Those who are ***“rich toward God”*** understand that more money is not the answer to our problems; that real happiness can never be had without God, and that only a fool would choose to live as if the here-and-now is more important than what is yet to come. Those who are ***“rich toward God”*** know, it’s not all about me. It’s about Jesus!

Knowing Jesus like that makes you and me the richest people who have ever lived! That’s right, you and me — because we have Jesus in our hearts, in our lives and in our forever futures.

Amen.