

Scripture Reading for August 4th 2019

Luke 12 :13-31 (NIV)

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.”

²² Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.

²⁴ Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ²⁵ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? ²⁶ Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

²⁷ “Consider how the wildflowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!

²⁹ And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. ³⁰ For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Sermon: Wealth and Worry

Fear and anxiety are all around us! They are perpetuated in the news, daily. More personally, we worry about tomorrow – whether it is over our health or wealth – or lack thereof. We can also be anxious over relationships, responsibilities, work - or the lack of it - and for a multitude of other reasons. We are inevitably surrounded by stressors in life and being anxious is a manifestation of their influence. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, I am going to suggest today that behind anxiety is the need for security and stability. Moreover, we are often persuaded that *money* can buy us that *security*. That's why we have insurance, pension plans, savings and investments, property, etc. Of course, its more complicated than that; after all, money *can't* guarantee good health - and we also have to throw in our genetic disposition and upbringing and their contribution to anxiety. But I trust we can all relate to concerns over security and wealth, especially in a secular and materialistic society.¹ We ask all sorts of questions: "Is my job secure?" "Is my business on a good trajectory for a profitable year?" Will there be a good harvest this year, after all that earlier rain?" "Do I have enough money to retire comfortably?" What will happen to me if the economy tanks?" And so on. The link between money and possessions with security is firmly embedded in our psyche. Thankfully, we in Canada have the added benefit of a social safety-net that many in other countries do not enjoy. Without that, our personal levels of anxiety might be even higher! Many in Jesus' day only had *just* enough to live on - and there was no societal safety-net. Moreover, their futures were unpredictable, not just simply in terms of farming disasters, but of taxation, wars, etc. And when a breadwinner became sick or injured, it could mean instant destitution for the whole family. They were certainly not able to think about affording a new car or an exotic vacation abroad! With all this in mind, consider the incident in our gospel reading today.

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."² According to the Mosaic Law, the elder brother would receive a double portion of the father's inheritance.³ Apparently, the man's older brother refused to give him what he felt was his due; family squabbles over money after someone has died is nothing new! In those days, it was not uncommon for people in Palestine to take their unsettled legal disputes to respected rabbis. Jesus, however, rejected this role of judge.⁴ As Luke tells it, Jesus perceives the man's motives are driven by greed.⁵ Instead, Jesus points the man to a different understanding of life⁶ by means of a short, tragic⁷ parable. Let's hear it again:

¹ Of course, we can all protest that all we want is "enough," but no one knows how much is enough!

² Luke 12:13.

³ Deut 21:17. If the father had no sons, his possessions would be divided amongst his daughters. However, his daughters were then required to marry within their father's tribe so that his possessions would not leave the tribe (Num 27:1–11; 36:7–9.)

⁴ Luke 12:14; even though Moses had handled similar requests – see [2].

⁵ Luke 12:15.

⁶ In Acts, Luke makes it clear that it is *not* necessary for all the followers of Jesus to get rid of all their possessions (cf. Luke 12:33); but they are *not* to be "possessed" by them.

⁷ Unlike some of the other stories in Luke, such as the Good Samaritan (10:25-37) or the Lost Sheep (15:3-7), or the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), this parable contains *no* last-minute rescue and a happy-ever-after.

“The *ground* of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.”⁸ Notice Luke’s wording: the abundant harvest was *not* a direct result of the landowner’s efforts;⁹ no, it was the soil, the sun, and the rain that made him wealthy. That would be understood in those days as *God’s* provision or blessing, for which one would at least give thanks to God. What happens next in the story is that we hear the thoughts of the landowner.¹⁰ “What shall *I* do? *I* have no place to store *my* crops. This is what *I’ll* do. *I will* tear down *my* barns and build bigger ones, and there *I will* store *my* surplus grain. And *I’ll* say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”¹¹ The first thing we notice is that despite God’s abundant provision, there is no mention of God or any sense of gratitude towards him. Instead, we notice the excessive use of the personal pronoun “*I*,” “*I*,” “*I*,”: What shall *I* do? *I will* do this and that, and *I’ll* say to myself . . .¹² This *unexpected* bumper crop leads him to conclude that he can embark on a hedonistic lifestyle and take life easy: eat, drink and be merry.¹³ This is simply *entitlement culture* and the modern equivalent of this story is of an industrialist who captures a corner of the market with a winning product and unexpectedly makes a mint for himself. The ethical quandary is, “What should he with all his surplus wealth?” Like Scrooge in Dicken’s *Christmas Carol*, the man in the parable is also aggressively self-centered and does not even think of giving some of it away or sharing it with others; *it was all about himself and his possessions*. Then God speaks to him: “You fool! Your soul is bankrupt,¹⁴ foreclosure is imminent, your dead! Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”¹⁵ But no sooner has the landowner *envisaged* his own future does God declares to him what is it his life will *actually* hold - death!

Jesus concludes this sorry and provocative tale with, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”¹⁶ Jesus makes it clear to the man who wanted him to be the arbitrator (in his inheritance dispute) that life is *not* to be valued or measured in terms of wealth or possessions. Greed,¹⁷ therefore, prevents us from being rich toward God since our primary focus is on ourselves. Money matters and enough is never enough. Too much money, too many investments, can be a distraction from actually using it for doing good. This is also a blunt message to Christ’s followers: You can’t behave or think like this and be my disciple.

You might, quite understandably, object: “What’s wrong with storing an over-abundance of crops?” Many frugal-minded folk have food supplies in pantries saved for a rainy day or have squirrelled away

⁸ Luke 12:16.

⁹ Moreover, there is nothing in the story to say that the man mistreated his workers or was lazy in any way.

¹⁰ Luke often betrays this as a means to showing how Jesus exposes the secrets of the heart see also Luke 12:45; 15:17; 16:3–4; 18:4–5; 20:13.

¹¹ Luke 12:17-19.

¹² This can only be intentional and an example of Luke’s rhetorical skill in storytelling!

¹³ See Eccles 8:15; Isa 22:12-14, and 1 Cor 15:32b. (Hear also the contextual echoes of Tobit 7:10–11).

¹⁴ See also Luke 12:34. There is also Greek wordplay between “soul” and “life” in 12:19-20,22-23 as both are from the Greek *psyche*.

¹⁵ Luke 12:20. God’s perception of the man is very different from his own. [Incidentally, I’m *not* going to say, “You can’t take it with you,’ so be generous with your assets - especially to the church!” Though, perhaps, our treasurer might like me to!]

¹⁶ Luke 12:20-21.

¹⁷ Luke 12:15. Notice the phrase “all kinds of greed.”

funds under the mattress for hard times. (Incidentally, even 40 years after World War II, my mother-in-law still had a cupboard full of bags of sugar because she never wanted to be without it again!) Is not such behaviour prudent protection against future economic uncertainty? After all, this is precisely what the Joseph advises Pharaoh to do after interpreting his dreams of a bumper crop in Genesis 41. Let's be clear: saving for future material needs *is* one component of good stewardship of God's provision. However, concern for the future is to be balanced with *trusting* in God's ongoing provision and in *caring today* for one's neighbours and the marginalised – along with *sharing* with those without the access to the wealth of our Western world, even for the basics of survival.¹⁸ This parable illustrates the deceitfulness of riches and their illusion of creating security, along with the emptiness of a materialistic, pleasure-seeking lifestyle. The man has his security in self-sufficiency; he needs no one else. There isn't even a mention of love for his family or faithful friends or an acknowledgment of the hard work of his employees. Neither does he feel the need to support his wider community. He has a prideful inclination that he can make it on his own and that he doesn't need anyone else. The foolish man was so preoccupied with himself and his possessions that he had forgotten both God and his neighbour. Actually, that's practical atheism; he was managing his own life with no reference to God. Part of the story, therefore, is a warning against covetousness and a reminder for the need to take God account into one's plans. Furthermore, however we view divine providence today, behind this parable is an acknowledgement that we are not as "in control" of our futures as we think we are. It also encourages us to look at our own lives in a mirror and to recognise those inner voices.

The lectionary reading stops at Luke 12:21, which is unfortunate as an added punchline comes in 12:34, which says "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."¹⁹ And in between Jesus gives a speech to his followers on worry and God's provision, recognising that many of them were poor and had genuine cause to be anxious over an uncertain future. Jesus encourages them *not* to make decisions that are controlled by anxiety, particularly over the basic needs for survival, namely food and clothing. This is easier said than done, I know! Yes, these are natural and legitimate concerns, but real security does not come by simply being concerned about the *means* of daily life. Life is *more* than food and the body is *more* than clothing.²⁰ He supports this claim with an argument from 'the lesser to the greater,' namely, "God cares for birds and the wild flowers, will he not also care for you?"²¹ That's the *kind* of God in whom we trust.²² Excessive anxiety reflects a *lack of trust* in God and a lack of interest in God's wider kingdom work because we are cripplingly concerned over our own needs. This might sound harsh and unfair, but it is also common sense because being anxious does not actually solve our problems. It even adds to them; worry is more like to shorten life than extend it!²³ As someone said, "Worry never

¹⁸ Numerous Psalms and passages in the prophets reiterate the obligation towards the poor, especially to those who have been blessed with abundance. God is concerned with social justice. But the landowner seems to not take God's perspective into his heart.

¹⁹ Having "more" is no solution to anxiety because all we want to do is to have even more and jealously protect our wealth.

²⁰ Luke 12:23.

²¹ Luke 12:24, 27. Anxiety, if not experienced by lower creatures within nature (e.g., birds), must be a by-product of *human* freedom. See also Luke 12:6-7.

²² Ironically, on US money, it claims "In God we trust."

²³ See Luke 12:25-26.

robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy. Jesus concludes by reminding them that God our Father knows that we need the basic necessities of life, consequently, seek his kingdom and these things will be given to us as well.²⁴

A key point of this speech is that it drives home the lesson of the parable and shows the futility of worry over material goods. Moreover, the disciples are told, in effect, that they should *not* feel a twinge of envy for those with worldly power and wealth, but to recognise how easily such possessions can corrupt. Note that these words are *not* intended for destitute people who don't have *enough* to eat! These words are addressed to people who have food to eat and clothes to wear and yet spend their lives trying to acquire more and more.²⁵ Neither is it a call to be passive and do nothing; it is a reminder to trust in a faithful God who cares for us as we live according to God's kingdom values.

These are powerful words for us as, if we are honest, we are all prone to worry.²⁶ This passage is a reminder to try and see life from God's perspective and not simply our own. Here are some reflections on what might learn today from these words of wisdom from Jesus.

First, I come back to that earlier point of practical atheism and *not* including God in the equation. Life in the West is comfortable for many and God as the source of all provision is overlooked or forgotten. People may say they believe in "God," but it's in a vague, distant, Creator God, *not* a personal God who makes demands on our lives. Turning to religion may occur in a crisis as a last resort when all alternative hope is lost, but otherwise we trust in ourselves for our "daily bread."²⁷ Practical atheism is a widespread spiritual malaise within our secular society, which – by definition – omits God from the equation. And while "spirituality" is certainly on the rise, which only shows a certain discontent with secularism, those who practice such things are still in the driving-seat and not subject to any external demands.²⁸ "Eat, drink and be merry" is, then, a creed for the illusive pursuit of personal happiness, just like the man the parable. Jesus warns, "Don't exclude God from the equation." This, therefore, calls us to identify *where* God is in the equation of our thinking and planning in our own lives.

Second, we all need to be honest about our attitudes to money and possessions. This often reveals the true heart of the church or an organization, as well as individual households.²⁹ From Luke's theological perspective, having wealth, possessions, and elite economic status is not *neutral*. In fact, they are inherently negative because people often become rich by exploiting the poor and use their wealth to

²⁴ Luke 12:29-31.

²⁵ Giving to the poor was, along with prayer and fasting, the foundation of Jewish piety. As Luke also tells us in Acts, the Christian community continued in this responsibility towards the needy, often in radical unselfishness.

²⁶ Mental health is a huge, complex issue today and while the symptoms and factors are varied, they include *anxiety*.

²⁷ See Luke 11:3.

²⁸ More positively, I suggest, it reflects a deep restlessness and desire for God (cf. St Augustine).

²⁹ See also 1 Tim 6:6-10: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.* Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." This passages resonances with Luke 12:13-31 is remarkable.

enhance and protect their own status.³⁰ This is challenging and disturbing stuff and forces us to ask, “What does it therefore mean *practically* for us to be “rich towards God?”³¹ Jesus doesn’t specifically answer that question, but clearly implied is the message *not* to be “hoarders” and to seek those things God values.³² If there are only two basic impulses to life, either to *grasp* or to *give*, then *don’t* be controlled by grasping.³³ When the rat race of materialism threatens to control us, remember these words: “There’s *more* to life!” Followers of Jesus should be freest of people, free from anxiety, free from social conventions of materialism, and free to be generous to others. Not easy, I know. When we work, we therefore need to ensure that we are *not* striving to secure ourselves from all possible calamities. Instead, we must work hard enough for the necessities and remember the future is always uncertain and ultimately its in God’s good hands. Remember, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”³⁴ Let us pray.

³⁰ See also Luke 14:7–14; 16:19–31.

³¹ See Luke 12:21.

³² Luke 12:21,31.

³³ Luke 12:33-34 suggests an antidote to anxiety: a devotion to providing for the needs of others.

³⁴ Luke 12:34.