



LORD, TEACH US WHAT TO TREASURE

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Luke 12:13-21

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A few years ago, David Brooks wrote a column in the New York Times in which he described the difference between “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” Resume virtues are, of course, the ones you put on your résumé—the skills you bring to the marketplace. The degrees, credentials, honors, and awards that will advance your standing in a competitive environment, prove your worth, advance your career, increase your income potential, and promote your social capital. There is nothing wrong with résumé virtues. We are rightly proud of our accomplishments and the hard work that stands behind each one we include on our résumés. These are the virtues our culture and our educational systems spend a great deal of time teaching—the skills and strategies we will need for success.

Eulogy virtues, Brooks notes, are different. Eulogy virtues are the ones talked about at your funeral—whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?

There is a story about Alfred Nobel that illustrates remarkably the difference between these virtues. This story may be true or it may be apocryphal (scholarship is divided), but either way, it is instructive.

One morning in 1888, Alfred Nobel opened his morning newspaper and read there his obituary. It was his brother, Ludvig who had died from a heart attack in France, but due to sloppy reporting, the obituary named the deceased as Alfred instead. Nobel’s father had had grown rich running armaments factories and building underwater mines for Russia during the Crimean War. Alfred had become famous for developing new types of explosives, inventing among other things, dynamite,



used widely in both construction and warfare. He was astonished to read a scathing obituary that branded him a “merchant of death” who had grown rich by developing new ways to “mutilate and kill.”

A biographer says it was this experience that caused Alfred Nobel to re-evaluate his reputation. To consider how he would be remembered posthumously. Nobel changed his will, leaving the vast majority of his estate to a series of prizes for “those who in the preceding year shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind.”

Nobel listed five awards in his will, though a sixth award in economics was added later. The five awards were for: the greatest invention or discoveries in the fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, literary work, and then the award for “the person who shall have done the most or best work for fraternity between the nations and the abolition or reduction of standing armies and the formation and spreading of peace...”¹

Chapters 11 and 12 of Luke’s Gospel provide one after another of in-your-face encounters. Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, confronting and challenging the way things are ordered. In today’s text, Jesus is walking along, surrounded by his disciples and a huge crowd when someone asks Jesus to settle a family dispute. People often asked a rabbi to arbitrate a disagreement. This last week, someone I have ‘known’ since childhood, but really only now know as a “Facebook Friend,” asked for prayer. What, I wondered, might be wrong? A medical test that worried her? A loved one in the hospital? A child or grandchild in some danger? The next morning she explained...she and her siblings had met to discuss their father’s estate. “We love each other,” she said, “but we do not always see things the same way.” “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me,” the man asked. Instead, Jesus turns and warns him, and the rest of us, too: “Take care! Be on your guard! Greed surrounds you, but your life is about more than the abundance of your possessions!” Then Jesus tells a parable.



Sometimes Jesus' parables provide comic relief—like the man last week banging on his neighbor's door at midnight to borrow bread. Sometimes parables bring joyful news—a lost lamb is carried home on the relieved shoulders of a shepherd. Sometimes parables provide beautiful imagery of the kingdom—as leaven rising in a hot loaf of bread, as a pearl in an oyster; of a treasure buried in a field. Parables can be so mysterious that the disciples ask Jesus to explain their meaning. But this parable is not funny or joyful or beautiful or mysterious. It so blunt it literally takes your breath away.

It tells of a man who has so much, that he has run out of room for all of his surplus. He decides to build bigger barns so he can keep storing more of his stuff. He is proud of his accomplishments and his accumulations because they provide him all he needs now and for the future, too. He is ready to sit back and enjoy the fruits of all his efforts—to finally have the time to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” And just as he settles into his leather chair with glass of scotch, God appears and says “You fool!” which is never a good way for a conversation with God to begin. “This very night, your life is being demanded of you. And all of this stuff...whose will it be?”

The man is not a fool because he is rich and successful. Nowhere is someone condemned simply for being successful or wealthy. No, he is a fool because he has let greed become an idolatry in his life. Said one scholar: “The man has chosen to live in a world of one.”ⁱⁱ Most of the parable consists of this man talking only to himself. If you were to count his inner dialogue, you would find there almost 60 words that begin with the phrase: “He thought to himself...” and then the words “I” and “my” take over. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said in a sermon on this text: “This man was a fool because he said ‘I’ and ‘my’ so much until he lost the capacity to say ‘we’ and ‘our.’ He failed to realize that he couldn't do anything by himself. This man talked like he could build the barns by himself, like he could till the soil by himself. And he failed to realize that wealth is always the result of the commonwealth. ...Oh, my friends, I don't want you to forget it. No matter where you are today, somebody helped you get there.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Working backward in the parable, we should have seen it coming. Because it begins: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly.” This man’s abundance is not of his own making. It came forth from the land, from the Creator’s abundant earth. King reminds us that we can’t leave home in the morning without being dependent on the rest of the world: you reach for a sponge...from the Pacific islands, a towel—where was it made? The coffee you drink—where was it grown? The gas for your car or the bus you take—where is it from? Before we have made it to noon, we have depended on more than half of the world.

Greed, New Testament scholar Matthew Skinner says, “compels us to banish anyone who looks like they might threaten “what’s ours.” Likewise, idolatry constructs world-views in which self-interest is the cardinal virtue. Idolatry lies,” Skinner continues, “whispering that cupidity, the excessive desire for money, won’t erode my capacity for community.” But it does. “Idolatry makes fools of us all when it convinces us to create religious justifications for our arrogance or hardheartedness.”^{iv} The man talks only to himself about how he will store for himself all that he has. He does indeed live in “a world of one.” As only Martin Luther King, Jr. could put it:

“This man was a fool because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived. He was a fool because he maximized the minimum and minimized the maximum. This man was a fool because he allowed his technology to outdistance his theology...his mentality to outrun his morality. He became so involved in the means by which he lived that he couldn’t deal with the way to eternal matters.”

He lived, you see, in a world where there was no room for others; no room for God. Until there God was. And what then? What mattered then?

Fred Craddock once told the story of a schoolmate of his who ministered mostly in China. He had been put under house arrest there when the soldiers came one day and said, “You can return to America.” They started to celebrate. The soldiers said, “You can take two hundred pounds with you.”



Well, Fred said, they had been there for years. Two hundred pounds. They got the scales and started the family arguments: two children, wife, husband. Must have this vase. Well, this is a new typewriter. What about my books? What about this? They weighed everything, and took it off, and weighed this and took it off... and finally, right on the dot, two hundred pounds.

The soldier asked, “Ready to go?” Yes. “Did you weigh everything?” Yes. “You weighed the kids?” No, we didn’t. “Weigh the kids.” And in a moment, typewriter and vase and all became trash.” Craddock said. “Trash. It happens.”^v

Years before Brooks wrote his column on résumé and eulogy virtues, author and columnist Peggy Noon wrote this: “In a way, the world is a great liar. It shows you it worships and admires money, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t. It says it admires fame and celebrity, but it doesn’t, not really. The world admires, and wants to hold on to, and not lose, goodness. It admires virtue. At the end it gives its greatest tributes to generosity, honesty, courage, mercy, talents well used, talents that, brought into the world, make it better. That’s what it really admires. That’s what we talk about in eulogies, because that’s what’s important. We don’t say, ‘The thing about Joe was he was rich.’ We say, if we can, ‘The thing about Joe was he took care of people.’”^{vi}

This past week, the wife of one of our beloved and longtime members, Don Roberts, died. Don has allowed me to share something with you today about Mary Roberts, his wife, who was a Roman Catholic. She was quite an accomplished woman. Her obituary rightly lists the schools from which she graduated: Chapin, Smith, New York University, Stanford. The awards she received, her success in banking, her generosity to institutions and her service on numerous Boards. Don was working on her obituary when we spoke. He recounted some of these details, but then his voice caught. Don said: “But the most important thing is what we have put at the end.” I read her obituary in the Times on Thursday. The very last sentence reads: “More important than the above, Mary was a Christian: She did



justice; she loved mercy; and she walked humbly with her God.” It is true of her, Don said, filled with deep love.

This parable encourages us to spend less time and effort on storing up treasures for ourselves and to be instead those who are “rich toward God.”

Jesus’ parables are meant to stay with us...to make us think. Parables ask important questions and push us to consider ultimate things. And then to live differently as a result; to live more faithfully, as if the kingdom of God really is here and now. And so the important thing comes at the last: “be rich toward God.” That is what we are left, finally, to answer for ourselves. In your life, in your family’s life, what does it mean, really, tangibly, to be rich toward God? In how you use your money—and your time? In where you put your hardest effort, your highest hopes, your deepest desires? In what you keep for yourself and what you give away for the sake of others. “Be rich toward God,” Jesus counsels us. How does that challenge what you think of as “yours?” How you view others—those who may be your competition and those may need your help?

Right now your Pastor Nominating Committee is working on a form that will describe who you are as a congregation to your next Senior Minister. It will give the numbers: how many members, the size of your endowment and operating budget, how much you give to mission. It will describe the magnificence of these buildings. These are important, of course. But there is something more your next Senior Minister will want to know even more: “In what ways are you, as a congregation, rich toward God?” If you were asked that question, what story would you tell? What would you want them to see? Where in this building would you take them? Where beyond this building would you invite them to come and see, “Look at this! Here, in this way, we are rich toward God!” To be rich toward God, Jesus said at the end. What does that mean? What does that look like?

Augustine said: “God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.”



Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.history.com/news/did-a-premature-obituary-inspire-the-nobel-prize> Article by Evan Andrews, December 9, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Matthew Skinner in WorkingPreacher.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., Sermon entitled, “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool,” preached at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, IL, Aug. 27, 1967.

^{iv} Skinner, workingpreacher.org

^v From **Craddock Stories**, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 22-23.

^{vi} Peggy Noonan, “A Life’s Lesson,” June 20, 2008 in the Wall Street Journal.