

# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Grow Richer, Share Abundantly

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, August 4, 2013*

*The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Colossians 3:1-11 and Luke 12:13-21*

"Relax, eat, drink and be merry!" It sounds appropriate to say to ourselves and to each other this time of year. As we settle into midsummer, it should hopefully be a light time of rest and relaxation and good food and fun, as so many of us are on summer vacation or are about to go.

And as it is summer with a couple of our clergy also on vacation, I was delighted, no, thrilled to be asked to preach today! And I innocently agreed before looking at today's readings! Oh my. A gospel lesson that invites anxiety over money, possessions, success and greed. An epistle that instructs us to put to death fornication, impurity, passion—oh, and there's that greed again! Seriously? Who am I to talk about these? I faced two choices: one was to run away, the other to put my trust in God and show up!

Today we hear the parable of the rich landowner. This man is pretty rich—he is not just a farmer with a small plot of land, but likely owns a whole region; others likely depend upon him for their own food. So this rich landowner's barns are already overflowing with goods, and then he harvests this additional crop and has nowhere to store it. He decides to go through the trouble of tearing down his barns to build larger ones, where he can store all his grain and all his goods for as long as he needs it. And once it is done, he is happy. He is all set, and he goes to relax, eat, drink, and be merry, take a summer vacation, retire and kick back . . . But God suddenly and harshly thunders from above, addressing the rich man as, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus ends by telling us, "so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Now, what's wrong with storing the abundance? Some of us may be getting nervous by now—I'm sure many if not most of us are very good savers! How many of us have storage units? Savings accounts? Is the rich man—and we in turn—not allowed to plan ahead, to be smart and prudent and responsible for the future? Does the man not deserve to celebrate his good fortune by eating and drinking and being merry? After all, Jesus always seemed to enjoy a good dinner party! But I think we all realize that we are not being asked to cash out our 401(k)s and savings accounts and give all that we have away, at least not quite. We can and should have concern and we should plan for our futures and our families, but we are being asked to balance that with giving thanks and glory to God for what we have! Nowhere in this parable does the rich man seem grateful! And in the story, it's all about him! "I and me and my, I do and I will and I have." There is no mention of any others—no mention of the man's spouse or children or servants or friends or neighbors. It has become all about him. He is isolated. He is self-centered, and he can't see beyond what is his. In the future he could become even richer by increasing the price of the food if there is a shortage. Others could become dependent on him and then be cheated. Herein lies the problem. We are called to share what we have. We are called to care for our neighbors and especially for the poor and the marginalized. This rich man was given a blessing that he in turn could have used to bless others. He could have shared it with those who have no land to produce their own crops. He could have aided those with no one to provide for them, like widows and orphans. Instead, he regarded it as a hindrance! Instead, it sits in storage for him to have later. He becomes so focused on his abundance that he idolizes it.

So this parable invites us to take a good look at ourselves and our community. Are we rich toward God? Are we rich enough? How can we be richer? In our modern culture where we are encouraged to spend more, borrow more to spend more and have more and use more, we must from time to time look at what we have and what we are doing with it. Do we even need what we want? Are we thankful for what we already have?

It can be difficult, but we need to acknowledge that we are rich to begin with. According to my own personal financial statements, my current net worth is presently a negative number, but I know indeed that I am rich. As an American-born, educated woman who lives and works in the First World and in one of its most expensive cities, I am rich; and I must acknowledge and own my privilege and my status. Beyond resources, I am blessed with people, family and friends and colleagues who love me and go out of their way for me. So I am very rich. And so I must keep asking myself: How do I share my abundance? And as a rich person, how does what I do and buy harm others? Our clothing, our electronics—so much is made by low-wage workers under dangerous conditions. So many of the things we do and desire harm the environment and the earth. In fact, some days it seems impossible to not buy into our global economy of harm and abuse in some way or form. I know that I am guilty of contributing to the harm; sometimes it seems unavoidable. But—We must keep asking ourselves, are we getting richer by exploiting the poor? Do we use our status or privilege to help or to harm others? Unlike the rich landowner, we must remember that all our lives are interconnected, and we are dependent and interdependent on each other.

So this parable calls us to reflect carefully. Despite what we accumulate, we never know when our life may be suddenly demanded, when suddenly all can change. What is distracting us from loving God and loving one another? Are we distracted by all the noise and busy-ness in our lives, by technology, by competition and running the "race"? The danger lies in when we become so distracted that we too begin to idolize—and then we walk away from God. We can get to the point of almost thinking that we don't need God; we delude ourselves into thinking that we are completely in control and we have the power.

So back to our question. How today, this week, and beyond will we grow richer toward God? What does it take to truly be rich toward God anyway? One writer points out that we have heard and read several good examples these past few Sundays! The Good Samaritan was rich toward God. Mary and Martha were rich toward God as they served and listened to Jesus.

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus teach us to be rich toward God by how we pray, by trusting in God and trusting that God will hear us when we pray and provide for us. Indeed, Jesus invites us to put aside our anxiety over earthly things and to enter into a deeper relationship with God in which we can find true purpose and joy. Our lives, and the people and things in them are gifts, and we can use them to serve God by serving others with love and compassion.

Each of us can go away with this question to carefully ponder and reflect on individually. And we can reflect on it corporately too. I have proudly been a member of St. Bart's because we are indeed a most generous and serving parish. From our own Community Ministry program downstairs all the way to the Carpenter's Kids in Tanzania—we give generously of our time, our talents and our financial resources to walk alongside people facing poverty, homelessness and other adversity. Yet we must always be thinking, how do we continue to reach and aid more men, women and children in need? What more can we do?

The writer of the Letter to the Colossians reminds us that our lives are "hidden" with Christ; we do not know for sure what the future will hold. Jesus calls us to put our trust in God and to live by faith. We are called to live lives ready to lose all we have in order to gain all we need. Our lives and possessions are on loan from God; therefore we must be good stewards of all of creation, being thankful for and sharing what we are given. And as we hopefully all get some rest and relaxation this summer, may we all be restored and renewed in knowing that indeed, Christ is all and in all. May we recognize Christ in ourselves and each other and seek God together. *Amen.*

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