

August 4, 2019
The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Dr. William C. Poe

THE TROUBLE WITH BIGGER BARNS

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

I remember reading a short story about a man who thought he had the future licked. By some magic, he had obtained a copy of the *New York Times*, the Sunday edition, dated a year in advance. What a gold mine! He knew what stocks to buy and sell, what properties to purchase, which teams to bet on for the World Series, the Super Bowl, and the NCAA Championships. Filled with glee as he thumbed through the future, he turned a page and ran smack into his own obituary!

The story is a shocker, but no more so than the shocker Jesus told. A rich man had a miraculous harvest and tore down his old barns to build bigger ones, thinking that he, too, had the future licked. Then, all of a sudden, his own mortality was staring him in the face.

We have to be careful in how we view this man, though. He wasn't a criminal -- his land produced well; the soil, sun, and rain joined in making him a wealthy man. He built bigger barns as an economic decision. He was neither wasteful nor careless; he seems to have been a prudent manager. So, if he wasn't a bad person, then what was he? Jesus says he was a fool. He lived completely in and for himself. He talked neither to others nor to God; he talked to himself, congratulated himself, planned for himself, provided for himself. Then suddenly, reality intruded, and "*the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*"

This story speaks to the affluent society so many of us enjoy here in America, and in the Western world, in general. Our homes are crammed with appliances, our farm surpluses are stockpiled. We hardly know what to do with all we have. When you look at our congregation, you have to admit that, at least by world-wide standards, even the poorest among us is rich, and the richest is incredibly wealthy.

But, you see, our problem is not our affluence. Our problem is a craving for security. When our children were little, our daughter Sarah had a little satin-covered pillow that was essential for her going to bed every night. Our son Christopher had an Ernie doll, the muppet character from *Sesame Street*, and they both loved "Spot," the raggedy stuffed dog that had been Betty Anne's toy when she was little. These special toys helped our children to feel secure.

We grown-ups still tend to think that we can secure our lives by having things. Like frightened children, we acquire things, gathering our stuffed animals around us in the dark -- a bigger house, a better pension plan, another bank account, an investment portfolio. We build up our lives, and we wall ourselves off, and we hope somehow to ward off the encroaching dark.

There is nothing inherently wrong or evil in any of this, but death, the reality of our own limits, mocks our earthly securities, and puts the lie to our grandiose plans. If we are honest, even Christ's life can seem futile by worldly standards -- a life snuffed out in its prime, a voice silenced, a message ultimately misunderstood, evil triumphant.

And yet, there's Easter! Easter doesn't answer the "Why?" of dying. Regardless of all the bumper stickers proclaiming, "Christ is the ANSWER!" Jesus does not dissolve all mysteries. But Easter does

testify to a God whose faithfulness transcends our living and our dying, and whose wisdom is broader and far more trustworthy than the swirls of our brief existence.

Some folks try to deal with such things by closing their eyes and ears to them, pretending they aren't there. Like the wealthy barn-builder, they are content to "relax, eat, drink, and be merry." But they are ultimately, and often devastatingly, disillusioned.

Others go off in quest of the "Spiritual Life." They hear Paul's words from the Letter to the Colossians -- "Set your minds on things above" -- and go from there. But even the "spiritual life" has become big business. You can have your illnesses healed over the airwaves, for a contribution. You can have all your questions answered, for a "love gift." You can insure your place in the heavenly choir, if you "share in the Lord's ministry." You can find inner peace and tranquility, if you just follow the "plan for spiritual growth." And, you can guarantee yourself a blessing if you just post "Amen" and share on Facebook!

But how different Jesus was. Though he was filled with the Spirit, he seems so "unspiritual." He ate and drank with sinners -- bureaucrats and prostitutes, by all reports. He mingled with outcasts, and with the certifiably irreligious. When he taught, he taught about very practical things -- yeast in bread dough, family relationships, monetary matters. It all reminds me of the story of a man who went off to see a rumored saint, to glean from the saint's wisdom. After an hour in private with the saint, he emerged in a fury. "I wanted heavenly things," he snorted, "and he asked to see my credit card statement!" Often, however, they are a fairly accurate inventory of what is truly important to us.

Jesus, too, was concerned about very practical ethics. But

when he died, God raised him up! God approved one earthly life lived in the obedience of love. God doesn't seem terribly impressed with our bigger barns, but God did put the stamp of approval on a life spent recklessly in love for all humanity.

Here is our clue for what it means to be "rich toward God." At least in part, it means to be rich in the way Christ was rich, by giving ourselves away. We can joyfully squander ourselves in love for others. Being rich toward God doesn't consist in building heavenly bank accounts against the great Judgment Day, but in using ourselves and what we have in the same loving, extravagant way God shows to us in Christ.

How shall we squander ourselves this week in love for our families, our friends and loved ones, and for others of God's children? As we consider true riches, let us draw closer to the Table, and let us pray.