

What Does it Mean to be Rich Towards God?

July 31, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

Luke 12:13-21

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to my successor, ¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or foolish? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³ For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Luke 12:13-21

The Parable of the Rich Fool

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.”

Often, when I read this passage from Luke, I feel as if God is speaking directly to me. I look around at my home at all this stuff. I really noticed it when my wife and I combined our things and moved in together after we got married – all into a 500 square foot apartment in Somerville. Even RCN employee who came to hook up our wifi, judged us, as he stepped over furniture and boxes.

The kicker is, yes, we donated things after a while and then I bought more stuff! We eventually bought a Nintendo switch, a projector which is our TV, and lots of books.

And then I hear these words, “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” I know that. I think we all know that. We hear warnings against greed. Teachings that remind us that where our treasure is, our heart will be there also. All over scripture.

I could just stand here and say, hi all – this is another reminder – life is more than about possessions and money. Be rich in God. Amen. Peace.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it so beautifully when she says, I am waist deep in treasure that I know won't save me, but that does not stop me from setting my sights on one more trinket to add to my cache. Furthermore, the culture in which I live sees nothing wrong with this quest. In fact, the culture in which I live *depends* on it.

Unbelievably true. We live in a consumer driven culture.

The things that we do buy smart phone, computer, eventually become outdated and so we throw out the old one and we get a new one. There are some of us here that get excited about getting a new smart phone or upgrading a computer, and there are others of us, that are like – I just want this one to keep working.

I fall into both categories.

A part of me dreads having to get a new phone. Then there are moments like this past summer, my wife's phone actually stopped working. We were going to Sprint to get her a new one, I turned to her and I was like well, you know.... My phone is pretty slow... maybe I need a new one, too. So, I gave the man helping us at Sprint my phone and said I would like to trade in my phone please. He laughed. Ma'am, this is an iphone6, we are selling iphone12 now, this is not worth anything. -I was completely dumbfounded.-

Consumerism. Buying more and more. Throwing out more and more. It is so imbedded into how we live our lives these days. And we know it.

Yes, I think we can all benefit from some self-reflection time to time and think about what we want our priorities to be. Not even just talking about where we put your money, but how we spend our time. And some of that reflection is awfully critical especially as we find ourselves in a climate crisis.

And with all this in mind, let's see if there is something else to Jesus's words today. Jesus ends the parable with. “Be rich towards God.”

What does it mean to be rich towards God? Typical Jesus doesn't tell us. It is like when he answers a question with another question. Even today, a man asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance

with him. Jesus responds with who has appointed me a judge between you and answers with one of his famous answers. A parable.

This question of what it means to be rich towards God, let's us hold on to this. We will return to it.

Now, it is clear Jesus's parable is talking about possessions, but it is also talking about labor. How this rich man worked so hard and stored up all his treasures so that he can then be merry.

We all have different motivators to work. Some of us seek to make a difference through our work. Some of us just enjoy the actual labor. Some of us work to get paid and support family and loved ones. Some of us spend years learning, building skills. Some of us go to school.

And many of us experience our identity and self-worth tied up in the work we do day to day. Usually work extends well beyond an 8-hour day. Whether because we need an extra job or extra shift to make ends meet, or because our one job demands that. We have the ability to now check email and phone calls from anywhere. These phone devices are great, AND they also keep us plugged into work all the time.

When we are unemployed, we experience shame. Unemployment is seen very differently than retirement. How can our identity not be so tied to the work we do?

I have been following and listening to Sarah Jaffe (Jaffe – y) quite a bit (she's a long-time labor economic justice reporter.) One of her arguments or perhaps warning is that our jobs will not love us back. As someone who does feel like I do experience love from job, I do think her point is an important one. She was interviewing essential workers during the pandemic who shared with her, they keep calling us "essential," but really, we feel like we are "expendable." We live in an economic system that tells us we can be replaced. That's not love.

Why am I talking about any of this? And what does this have to do with our readings today?

Processions are not inherently wrong. Looking for a job that you enjoy or a job in which you can make a difference in is not wrong – for the world without a doubt needs those jobs. I think it is the constant reaching, seeking more and more, feeling like what you are doing or what you have is not enough – can not only take away from our time to enjoy life, but it can take away from our relationship with God who sees us much more than by what we do or what we have. Worse, we then feel like we ourselves are not enough.

Not that we shouldn't have goals. BUT it can be a slippery slope when we don't think we are good enough until we reached that goal. In a culture that is constantly telling us to do more, be more.

It is also okay to not like your job or not find meaning in it. I know friends who work a desk job, clock out, hold a strict boundary and go enjoy hobbies and volunteer. Their life is outside of the 40 hours.

It is okay to love your job. Or love you job one day and not so much the next day. I love my work and find that loving it can tricky. Losing track of time and realizing there are other cups in my life I need to fill.

It is the defining ourselves by our possessions and our labor that I believe is the root of the problem – a problem that I think Jesus is drawing our attention to and warning us against.

Finding self-worth in our labor can lead us to learn more inwards – thinking there is something that is wrong with us, that we need to just be focused on making our selves better (I'm gonna add a little footnote here to include all kinds of labor – whether cleaning our home, childcare, care for a loved one). All this pressure to do more and be more.

Sarah Jaffe(Y) shares this story... I forget what kind of service industry she was referring to. Maybe it was a restaurant. When the person helping them walked away, this person turned to their child and said, “this is why you go to school, so you don't end up like them.” *Like them*. When we define ourselves by our own labor, I believe we begin to define others that way, too – looking down upon those whose labor we devalue.

And...Did you notice that in the parable, the rich fool is solely focused on himself?

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.”

He thought to himself, he said to himself. He did all this labor and work in isolation from others. Solely focused on himself and his own labor. Working to feel that pride, forever working toward that goal, “once I do this and store everything I can then live and be merry.” Defining his quote and quote “achievements” on what he had and what he had done. For his whole life.

And then God says, “You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

As if what difference did it all make? To be so focused on what was to come. To define yourself solely on your labor. Neither you nor anyone will enjoy any of it. Or benefit from it.

This, this feels like the moment to turn towards our first reading from Ecclesiastes. Or what I refer to as the great “why bother, if everything is vanity or empty” book.

Our reading essentially tells us - Everything I do and worked hard for my successor could be wise or foolish, yet he will be the master regardless. This is vanity. I gave my heart to despair and should be okay with someone else enjoying what I worked hard for. This is also vanity. And the vanity list goes on.

Many scholars argue that vanity, empty, meaninglessness are not totally accurate English translations.

Sometimes we see the word, “hevel,” a definition scholars tend to find more accurate. Hevel- meaning vapor or breath. Referring to life as temporary and life as a mystery, we may never fully understand. We cannot snatch it or control it.

And so, at the end of the book, the author of Ecclesiastes, concludes with “here is the conclusion of the matter: Be in awe of God and keep God’s commandments.” This is what our scripture offers us in response to some of life’s biggest existential questions.

I believe one of the biggest things that Jesus teaches us is God’s commandments are not meant to restrict or narrow our lives, but rather meant to expand our hearts and souls. To new life.

For when people critique Jesus at moments like when he healed on the sabbath, Jesus reminds them – what is the original intention of Sabbath? To be in alignment with God, creation and each other. These commandments are meant to deepen our relationship to God.

And so, Jesus today reminds us to be rich towards God. The question I now would like to return to with you.

How do we be rich towards God when we live in a culture and economic system that tells us our value and identity is tied to our possessions and labor? What does being in awe and keeping God’s commandments look like?

Maybe, just maybe, the answer to that question is not all that far from us. What if we are standing right on the answer. As Barbara Brown Taylor says,

“The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude of special company.”

What if being rich in God, does not mean that we have to look any further than what lies within us. Our inherent worth just because. Just because we are a part of God’s magnificent creation. What if being rich in God is embracing this truth for ourselves and seeing this truth in our neighbors that sit right beside us.

Maybe when we meet someone, our first question shouldn’t be “what do you do?” “what are your plans when you graduate from college or graduate school?” or to a child: “what’s your favorite subject in school?”

Believe me, I have asked my fair share of these questions. Until I realized that underneath some of those questions are unintentional questions, but questions none the less that ask how much do you make?

What is your “status”? or “worth”? What are you “good at”? We begin to measure each other based on this economic system we all live within, the very thing I believe Jesus is warning us against.

Maybe God is inviting us into this countercultural space where our value is not measured by our goals and accomplishments. Maybe instead we could ask someone we just met, “how is your day going so far?” “what has been the best part of your week?” Not that we can’t ask questions or talk about our labor, but maybe just not as the very first thing.

Maybe trusting that you are inherently God's beloved and we are all God's beloved, can be what breaks down barriers between us. Maybe Jesus was nudging the man who asked him to ensure his brother splits his inheritance with him so that he would focus more on the relationship itself with his brother.

Or as a dear friend puts it, "Were Jesus to provide the legal answer, the result would be both a division of property and the completion of a division of a relationship."

Letting our deep trust and care for one another is one way in which we can all be rich towards God. Sharing that abundant love and grace that is given to us freely every day and freely sharing it. Amen.

