

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Psalm 107: 1-9, 43

Colossians 3: 1-11

Luke 12: 13-21

Faith Community

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Introduction

I came across a cartoon several years ago that pictured a middle-aged man kneeling at his bed. He prayed, “Should I sell or hold? Today it rose to 33 1/2, could go to 35, but with the unstable market could drop to 30. What should I do?”

Why is this cartoon funny? Isn't it because we don't take concerns about accumulating wealth to God in prayer? There is something wrong with a person who already has more than enough asking God how to get even more. The gospel teaches us sharing, looking out for others, and caring for the poor, not greed and hoarding.

I

My guess is that many of us read this parable that Jesus told and ask, “What's wrong with what the man did?” Jesus tells this story about a man who tears down his barn and builds new ones because he has too many crops to store in the barns he has. That seems to us like the natural thing to do. You've been successful, things are going well, so, of course, you replace the smaller with larger. You expand. Isn't that what everybody does?

We replace smaller houses with bigger ones. It is amazing to me that after 22 years in the same house, and after our two kids have grown up and moved out, the house now seems small and limiting.

We replace older cars with newer, sometimes bigger, cars (like SUVs) with more gadgets and luxury items on them. We replace smaller with bigger, older with newer. It's the American way of life. Our economy is based on buying newer, bigger, and more elaborate.

II

But this isn't exactly the attitude that the man in this story has. He isn't building more to provide more, he is settling in with the huge amount he has.

The story makes clear that the man is already wealthy. It refers to him as a “rich man.” Now he has gotten a great deal more – so much so that he doesn't have any place to store it.

This is his attitude toward all that he has: “I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” He takes for granted what he has and assumes it will always be there. And that he will always be there to enjoy it. In other words he takes for granted the gifts that he has been given. Although, more likely he would consider what he has to be the result of his own shrewd planning and hard work.

Maybe we can get a better picture of his attitude by contrasting it with other approaches. Just this week I heard someone say, “I am so lucky – no, not lucky – BLESSED. I have good parents. I have strong, happy family. I have a good, caring, thoughtful husband. All but one of my grandparents is still living, and I am in good health myself. I have a lot to be thankful for.”

The thing that struck me first about this parable was that the rich man never expresses thanks for what he has. Often when that happens people don't think there is anyone else to thank but themselves. The rich man doesn't express thanks for what he has. He seems to take it for granted.

III

Contrast the rich man's attitude with another real life comment. Last December a member of this congregation stopped in the office late in the afternoon. He said, "Can I talk with you?" We went into my office and he sat down and began writing a check. This peaked my curiosity. (It doesn't happen everyday.)

As he was writing he said, "We have received a bonus this year that was a good bit higher than we had anticipated. We want to share part of that with our church."

This family's first thought on getting more money than they thought they would, was to think of who they could share it with. Not what to buy with it, not how long it would last at the mall, not even socking it away in savings, but here is an opportunity to share our good fortune with other people who need it.

We're all going to have to make decisions like that when the tax rebate checks start arriving this fall. The rich man in this parable didn't think, "Look at how I have been blessed, how can I share what I have with people in need?" He only thought about how much larger the barns would need to be to hold everything he had accumulated.

Conclusion

This parable points to differences in where we place our focus. When God has been good to us, do we hoard away what we have and worry about how to store it most effectively?

Or, do we approach this goodness with gratitude and thankfulness, realizing that we have been blessed and looking for ways to share that blessing. The film Pay It Forward was about the attitude of receiving with gratitude and passing that goodness on to other people. We show our thankfulness best when we share what we have with other people who are in greater need than we are.

Several years ago a woman came in to the Emergency Food Program on Monday morning just as the workers were finishing up the distribution of food. She had in her arms a large box full of toothpaste.

"I want to give this to the food program," she said. "For several years now we have been out of work, and I have been coming to get help here. Now I have found a job, so we won't need to be coming any longer."

She had used her first paycheck to go and buy this large carton of toothpaste. She said, "We really appreciated the food we got here, but lots of time we didn't have enough money to buy toothpaste. I just wanted to provide this as a way of saying thanks."

Certainly we would understand if she had taken her first paycheck and saved it in the bank. But she didn't. Her first act was to say thanks, in the best way she could.

Amen.