

The Family Inheritance
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 4, 2013
Rev. Dr. Sharon Nelson Arendshorst, guest preacher

Texts: Luke 12:13-21
Colossians 3:1-11
Ecclesiastes 1:2
2-14, 2:18-23

“Mine! Mine! Gimme, it’s mine!”

“Mine” is one of the two loudest words in a two-year-old’s vocabulary. The other word, of course, is “No!” I was careful this morning not to blast you out of your pews with the full volume of a two-year-old. “No!” or “Mine!” may be accompanied by a scream as piercing as a referee’s whistle in your ear.

Most of us grow less shrill as we mature. We may not even use the word “mine” as a demand. But, often there is a “mine” hidden in our requests, shaping our relationships, motivating our actions, shading our assessments, and even forming our stances toward life.

“Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me’” (Luke 12:13).

I wonder what is behind this person’s request? We can certainly hear a demand, “Tell my brother to gimme what’s mine.” But what’s motivating him?

- Is it fear of not having enough for his basic needs or to care for his family?
- Does he feel he’s been treated unfairly by his brother and desires a more equitable distribution of the family assets? Perhaps a few denarii, one of the fishing boats, a section of the olive grove?
- Is he angry that his brother is the first-born son, and thus the rightful heir according to Hebraic inheritance laws?
- Perhaps he is hurt by his brother’s lack of generosity?
- Is his grief over his parents’ deaths a factor?
- I wonder: Is he concerned for his sister or other siblings and their needs and desires?

We’ve all heard of family inheritance squabbles. We may even have stories in our own families. The slights, hurt feelings, and anger surrounding dividing up family possessions, or in response to the terms of a will, may end in broken relationships and family members no longer speaking to one another.

In the gospel lesson, a man interrupts Jesus’ teaching with his urgent demand. He is looking for Jesus to order his brother to give him a share of the family inheritance. As a rabbi, Jesus has the authority to interpret the inheritance laws and decide the disposition of the family estate, but

Jesus turns the man down flat! He doesn't refer the man to a judge to settle the dispute either. Instead, I believe that Jesus wants the brothers to work it out themselves. But first, Jesus shifts the focus from the surface inheritance issue to explore the underlying motives. Through a warning and parable, Jesus invites the brothers and all who are listening—then and now—to examine their hearts and true desires.

Jesus' teaching becomes the foundation from which the brothers, and we, can gain deeper understanding about motives, consequences and, God's desire. More is going on here than merely a legal matter involving family properties. There are relationship matters, life matters, and God matters. Jesus raises the question, where does our security lie?

Jesus warns the brothers and us to take care and to be on guard against all kinds of greed (v. 15). Greed is excessive, grasping, wanting more than one needs. Greed is insatiable in its desire for more and more. Greed doesn't consider the needs of others. Greed hinders gratitude. Paul in his letter to the Colossians identifies greed as a form of idolatry. (Col. 3:5) The thing desired takes the place of God. Greed destroys relationships and distorts the meaning of life. Jesus urges on-going vigilance to recognize and resist greed.

He emphasizes that “one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

That certainly is a different message than what we hear daily in our consumerist society, where we're told we can purchase happiness and that accumulating possessions will lead to the good life. We're seductively manipulated through created dissatisfactions, competition, promises of value, and even promises of self-worth. Television commercials, billboards, magazine ads and the internet all tell us that we don't have enough, we're incomplete, we can't possibly be happy without the latest smart phone, a unique brand of laundry detergent, the “high life” beer, or a new car. Preacher and commentator David Lose summarizes, “Our culture unequivocally equates consumption with satisfaction, possessions with happiness, and material wealth with the good life.”

We all know these are lies, but they are seductive lies. We sometimes act as if we believe the lies, or maybe we do—even just a little bit.

Pope Francis, speaking in Brazil this past week, said, “It is true that nowadays, to some extent, everyone, including our young people, feels attracted by the many idols which take the place of God and appear to offer hope: money, success, power, pleasure. Often a growing sense of loneliness and emptiness in the hearts of many people leads them to seek satisfaction in these ephemeral idols.”

In today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, the author of Ecclesiastes despairs. He resonates with the loneliness and emptiness of his life. He knows through experience that wealth, accomplishments and pleasures do not satisfy; they offer no hope. They are, in the words of Pope Francis, ephemeral idols, insubstantial, transient, “a chasing after wind” (Eccl. 2:11).

Jesus tells a parable about a rich man with a bountiful harvest. The man doesn't sound particularly greedy. He's not seeking after wealth. He isn't dishonest, and, as far as we know, he

hasn't abused his workers, or cheated in his business dealings. He appears to be an honorable person who, after an abundant harvest, needs to decide what to do with all his crops. He's planning ahead, and he's ready to kick back, relax, and enjoy his future.

In the parable, we listen in on the farmer's inner dialogue and thought process. We learn that the man may not have been excessively greedy, but he has several flaws in his approach to life. First, he is totally self-absorbed. He doesn't express any gratitude for the rich harvest. He gives no thought to God, or to others. Listen to the pronouns he uses in only three sentences: "I, I my, I, I, my, my, I, my" (Luke 12:17-19). His language echoes that of a two-year-old's claim, "It's mine!"

Mystic and writer Evelyn Underhill reflects, "Divide the world into 'mine' and 'not mine' and unreal standards are set up; claims and cravings begin to fret the mind. We are the slaves to our own property. We drag with us not a treasure, but a chain."

In Jesus' parable, the rich farmer begins to fret over what to do with the harvest overflowing his silos. He formulates a plan to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones. He congratulates himself on solving his storage problem and securing his future, a future as self-absorbed as his inner dialogue. He will "relax, eat, drink and be merry" (v. 19). This points to the second error in the man's thinking. He believes that he can secure his own future. He believes his wealth will make him independent, happy, and content

A popular investment company advertises their services with the tag line, "Own your tomorrow." A recent ad urges investors, "take ownership of your future." But, we know that wealth cannot guarantee our futures, or the quality of our lives. We don't own our futures. God does.

Another investment firm has shifted its mission statement from "wealth management" to "wealth preservation." To me, that sounds like a shift to building bigger barns, to hoarding for the future, rather than managing resources as a good steward from a grateful heart, seeking God's intention, sharing God's rich blessings with others.

I remember a bumper sticker from several decades ago that read, "He who dies with the most toys wins!"

Wealth is seductive. Our cultural assumptions equate wealth with worth, the good life, and future security. Like storing the abundant harvest in the parable, hoarding our wealth gives us the illusion that we can secure our own futures, that we can control our lives, and that we don't need others. Or God.

In the parable, just as the rich man's plan is taking shape in his mind, God intervenes and speaks directly to him, calling him a fool. God tells him that he will die that very night. What the man has accumulated will be of no use to him, and will be left to others. (v. 20)

It's important to note that in this parable the man is not a fool because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future. He is a fool because he appears to live only for himself. He thinks his

wealth is his alone, and that it and he alone will secure his future. He is a fool because he believes he owns his own future.

In this world, we must be wary of many temptations. We must be on guard against all kinds of greed, self-centeredness, and the delusion that we can secure our own futures. Jesus says life and true security are found in being rich toward God. (v. 21). To be rich toward God is a bit of a puzzle, a twist. We think of the many ways God blesses and is rich toward us. How can we be rich toward God? How can a baby be rich toward her parents when she has nothing to give and the parents give all to care for her?

If we listen to this phrase in the context of the whole story and Jesus' teachings that follow, being rich toward God is sharing in God's life, and in God's life for us. It includes seeking God, desiring God above all else, and trusting God with our lives. Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, writes instead of filling your barns with Self, "Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiatives, God-provisions."

Before we leave today's text, I'd like to return once more to the man who prompted Jesus' teaching with his family inheritance concerns. I'd like to imagine that both brothers heard Jesus' warning and parable. I'd like to imagine that they examined their hearts and began to talk openly and honestly together, naming their needs and concerns around very real money and property questions. I'd like to imagine them reconciled to one another as they placed their trust in God.

I would also like to imagine that we, too, could begin to have conversations around the sticky and sensitive money matters in our lives, the cultural imperatives to acquire more and more, and the temptations we face daily to place our security in the things of this world and in our own ingenuity and self-reliance. I would love to have conversations around how we live lives that are rich toward God. What does that look like and feel like for you and for me?

In the end, the important inheritance issues are not about the stuff of this world or whose it will be, but about relationships—with God and with one another. True security lies in our inheritance as sons and daughters of God who have been raised into new life in Christ.

This is the good news: in Jesus Christ we have new life, a living hope and "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading" (I Peter 1:4). In gratitude let us live lives that are rich toward God.

Amen.