

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, May 5, 2024**  
**10am**

Text: Luke 12:13-21

Theme: Satisfied with Enough: Cultivating Contentment

[prayer]

What is the modern American equivalent of a bigger barn?

The storage locker. Between my apartment and the church – a stretch of thirty miles – I pass a half dozen or more storage complexes. Did you know there is a reality television series called “Storage Wars?” The show pits professional buyers in a bidding war on storage lockers that people have failed to pay their rent on. The buyers estimate the value of the locker’s contents, and at the end of the episode they find out if they made a profit or lost money.

I look at those storage lockers and I remember ‘E.’ E was what we called a “frequent flyer” at the Portland VA where I worked as a chaplain. She was homeless and suffered from schizophrenia. She once had an apartment paid for by the VA but because of her mental illness, she was afraid to live there. The only place she felt safe was in her storage unit. That is where she lived all winter long without heat or running water. She would come to her appointments at the VA pushing a walker stacked with some of her belongings. Her most precious belonging was a little white cat named Baby who rode along to every appointment in her carrier. When E was hospitalized all she could talk about was getting better so she could be reunited with Baby. Taking care of Baby gave E’s life purpose and meaning in a way that all the stuff in those storage compartments never could.

Our Scripture lesson today recalls a man who came to Jesus with a family dispute. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus responds with great irritation: “Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?” (vv. 13-14 CEB).

Jewish law going back to the time of Moses stated that the eldest son should receive a double portion of the inheritance (Deut 21:17). Apparently, this man's older brother was refusing to give him what he felt he was due. So, he came to Jesus expecting Jesus to enforce the law. But Jesus rejected the man's petition because he refused to satisfy the greed he sensed behind the man's request.

Instead, Jesus told the man and all the people who were listening a parable about a rich man whose fields produce a surplus of crops. The man has nowhere to store this surplus. So, he decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. He pats himself on the back for his forward-thinking stewardship; now he can rest from his work, eat, drink, and enjoy himself.

This parable is called the Parable of the Rich Fool or the Parable of the Bigger Barns. "Fool" is what God calls the rich man. God's words are harsh. But what is so foolish about saving for the future? Isn't saving some of what we have a prudent hedge against economic uncertainty? I got my first savings account when I was ten years old; my parents wanted me to learn the importance of saving for the future. We save for rainy days and emergencies and retirement. We stash food away in pantries and freezers and basement shelves. Storing grain in barns is precisely what Joseph told Pharaoh to do after he predicted seven years of famine in Egypt (Gen 41:17-36) – take the excess of the good years and store it away for the lean years so everyone can be fed.

Savings are not bad in and of themselves. Scripture teaches that saving for the future is one way to steward what God has given us. But this form of stewardship must always be balanced by God's command to return to God what is His and be generous in caring for our neighbors. The rich man in our parable does neither of those things. He is not content with the amount of grain only necessary to fill his current barns. Instead, he will tear these barns down and build bigger ones and hoard the surplus for himself.

The problem with the rich man is not the size of his harvest; it is the self-centeredness of his heart. *My crops, my barn, my grains, my soul.* The rich man's folly is that he has shut everyone else out from his thoughts. The only two characters in this parable are the man and his possessions...until God speaks.

“Fool, tonight you will die. Who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?” (v. 21). In other words: There are no storage facilities in heaven. Other translations read, “This very night your life is being demanded of you” (NRSVUE). It’s not clear who or what is doing the demanding. Our English translation makes it sound like God. But the Greek verb is a third-person plural (“They will demand”). The “they” could very well be the man’s possessions! God may be warning the man that his wealth will take his life from him. Jesus asked his disciples, “For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves?” (Luke 9:25 NRSVUE). The man made an idol out of his prosperity and sacrificed his soul in the process. He may have been rich in things, but he was spiritually poor.

In contrast, consider this story. A man lost his house and all his possessions to a raging brush fire. In an interview with a local television station, he recalled how his brother recently mused they should not allow possessions to possess them. This man, who had just seen everything he owned go up in smoke, announced to the reporter with a note of triumph: “I am a free man now!”

What makes us content? What makes us happy? Our basic needs – food, water, shelter, safety – must be met for us to thrive. Beyond that, though, our needs become less tangible: love and belonging, esteem, self-actualization. These are the things that bring meaning to our lives.<sup>1</sup>

Paul gives us his recipe for contentment in his letter to the Philippians: “From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. And the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:8-9).

Paul knew plenty. He also knew poverty. In plenty and in poverty, his contentment was found in the richness of his inheritance in heaven. His soul was satisfied by Christ alone and the calling he had received to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth. This was the only treasure truly worth possessing.

The Parable of the Rich Fool holds a mirror up to each one of us and asks us to examine our own relationship to our possessions. Do we have enough? Do we

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs)

have *more* than enough? Are we being rich toward God and others? Jesus says, “Guard yourself against all kinds of greed” (v. 15). This is a command for rich and poor alike. Keep in mind that greed isn’t just about money and possessions. We can be greedy with our time. We can be greedy with our relationships.

If the rich fool’s field brought forth abundantly, it was because of God’s blessing. This blessing demanded stewardship not only for the rich fool’s sake, but for the sake of his whole community. Recently, the Spokane Hutterite Colony gave away 250 tons of free potatoes to their neighbors. They anticipated a percentage of their crop would not be purchased this year. Rather than allowing the potatoes to rot, they chose to give them away for free. They unloaded the potatoes outside a firehouse in Reardan. Hundreds of people came to fill their buckets and bags with “potatoes from heaven.”<sup>2</sup> About a third of the U.S. food supply is wasted every year – 133 billion pounds that could feed hungry people.<sup>3</sup> God bless our Hutterite siblings in Christ for their better witness!

The prophet Malachi preached, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (3:10, NRSV).

God repeatedly commands the ancient Israelites to return a portion of their harvest annually to Him. This is what Scripture means by a 'tithe.' A tithe was one tenth of the crops, herds, and flocks raised by the people. The storehouse was a room in the Temple. The food that was annually returned to God was used to feed the Levites - the priestly class responsible for ministering to the nation. The tithe was one way the ancient Israelites ensured that ministry would be sustained for another year. This food was also used to care for the poor in the community.

Keeping the tithe meant the ancient Israelites practiced what they preached. If they believed that the fruits of creation came directly from God, then God had a right to say how those fruits should be used. The tithe acknowledged the right ordering of creation: God blesses the Israelites so they can be a blessing to the world. The overflowing blessings promised by God are a reminder that when we

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.krem.com/article/news/community/free-potatoes-spokane-county-reardan-hutterite/293-88d4a33d-822d-4980-b035-4981fe8d4cf0>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usda.gov/foodwaste/faqs>

rightly order our relationship to our possessions by consulting God in their use, then we get to be part of God's work of blessing the world. The overflowing blessing is not the blessing of more stuff, but the blessing of heaven - the hope, peace, joy, and love that comes to us from sharing what we have with others. And the blessings of heaven are how we cultivate contentment.

Jesus' parable points us to a different set of priorities than the world offers. Our life is not measured by our wealth or possessions, but by the richness of our relationships with each other and with God. John Wesley taught that we will know enough is actually enough when we do three things: Earn all we can to meet our needs, save all we can by living simple and frugal lives, and then give away all we can from the abundance of God's blessings.<sup>4</sup> In God's economy, earning and saving exist so we can be generous people.

A commitment to a life that is "rich toward God" (v. 21) should provide us with a sense of deep and abiding joy. When other worries and financial pressures begin to erode our confidence in the grace we experience through generosity, then we know it is time to hold up that mirror, examine our hearts, and turn over to God whatever idols are keeping us from loving God and our neighbor.

This is true for the church, too. For what purpose does our congregation toil and save? Is our giving driven by our mission, or is our mission limited by our giving?

I think it is a little bit of both. I am thankful for all the generous people in this congregation. We are blessed by the generosity of previous generations who built not just one, but three, church buildings and paid them all off. We have tremendous resources in the form of this building and our land and endowed funds at the Faith Foundation Northwest. We have good spiritual habits of giving and good relationships in our community. Our annual UWif Rummage Sale is an excellent example of using our surplus to be rich toward others!

But we also long for the things we do not currently have – more people, more young families, more staff, a balanced budget. Jesus' warning to watch out rings true here. More, bigger, and better have become idols in a lot of churches. We need to be watchful for those idols in the way we talk and think about our church.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/john-wesley-on-giving>

A right ordering of our relationship with what we do and do not have might look like asking this question instead: How can our church be richer toward God? There are a lot of ways to approach this question. The way we share our building with various community organizations is one way we practice being rich toward God. We have more building than we currently need, and so it is good and right to share it with others who do not have a space of their own.

But I think there are other ways we can multiply the blessings God has given us. Our surplus of land is a prime example. Bishop Cedrick has challenged our congregation to think about whether we can use our land to help meet the critical affordable housing shortage in our community. A small team of people from our church is currently engaged in an intentional discernment process with a faith-based land development cohort. There are a lot of questions to think through before we can say yes or no. But we are excited to bring this conversation soon to all of you as we explore how we can be rich toward God and our neighbors with the land God has given us.

I'll conclude with this benediction from Jesus:

“Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights in giving you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Make for yourselves wallets that don't wear out—a treasure in heaven that never runs out. No thief comes near there, and no moth destroys. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be too” (Luke 12:32-34).

Amen.