

TWO CHEERS FOR STUFF

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2016

Jesus said, *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. (Luke 12:15)*

When I was growing up, my grandmother was a giver of many gifts to my two brothers and me. Whenever she gave us anything she always made sure we each received exactly the same. She also frequently told a cautionary tale of two sisters who were childhood friends of hers. My grandmother would explain that when the sisters were young their family was not well off. The only item that was said to be of value in the house was a magnificent oriental rug. In fact, the girls’ parents had told them that the rug was priceless, and that one day, one of them would own it. As the two girls came into adulthood, both continued to eye the rug. Both of them wanted it. Its value to them was even greater than the price it would fetch from any dealer. Indeed, to be granted the rug would be to receive the one blessing their parents had to give.

When both parents eventually died, it was the elder sister who inherited the rug. She was jubilant. The younger sister was bitter, and full of hurtful accusations that the other had manipulated their parents. The exchange of words was especially harsh, so much so that the two adult sisters never spoke to each other again. In time the older sister died, and with no one to whom she could bequeath the rug, it finally became the possession of the younger sister. At last the younger sister could spread her family heirloom on her floor, where she had always believed it belonged. This she did, and sat down to admire her rug.

It was right then that she knew something was wrong. Instead of feeling sentimental or satisfied in any way, she felt empty and hollow. Her rug did not make her feel better about herself or anything else, for that matter. Her parents were gone. Her estranged sister was gone. She was alone. All she had was this now-threadbare piece of wool that in many ways had been her focus for all these years. To make matters worse, when she had her rug appraised it was judged to be anything but priceless. It was quite common. It wasn’t valuable at all. Yet the price she’d paid was impossibly high; she’d sold her soul to obtain it.

Jesus said, *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. (Luke 12:15)* In today’s Gospel reading from Luke we’ve heard Jesus preach a cautionary tale to the younger of two brothers who were apparently squabbling over the family inheritance. We can assume that the younger brother was feeling cheated, manipulated, and shunned by his older brother who would have been, by Jewish law, the executor and principal inheritor of the estate. The younger brother wanted Jesus to step into the family argument and make a judgment. As you know, Jesus gave a two-fold reply. First, he declined the invitation to impose legislation on this family. He was not interested in how they carved up the stuff and apportioned the loot. He wasn’t interested in who got what, and how much. What he was interested in was how they treated each other. What was more important to them: the stuff or their relationship? What was the motivation of their hearts? This is what Jesus wanted to influence: inner motivations not outward legislation.

So the second part of Jesus’ reply to the younger brother was a parable to speak to his heart, and hopefully ours. The parable is about a rich man whose land produced abundantly, so

much so that his barns wouldn't be able to hold all the excess crop. *"What shall I do?"* he asked himself. And just as quickly as he asked, he decided what to do. *I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry."* But you heard how Jesus ended the parable. *God said to him, You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*

The story has come to be known as "The Parable of the Rich Fool," and the principal player is a favorite homiletical punching bag that few preachers can resist pounding on like a lump of rising bread dough. Thus, you are bracing yourself for another sermon on the evils of material wealth and possessions that I will cap off by telling you not to be like the rich fool. Instead, sell all that you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow Jesus. Actually, I'm going to preach a different sermon today. Instead, we're going to spend a few moments speaking in defense of stuff. How easy it would be, based on this parable, to jump to the conclusion that the material world is something that good "spiritual" people are supposed to avoid. Did you know that the effort to over-spiritualize the gospel was one of the earliest heresies that the church had to face? In the 2nd century the Gnostics were a group that held enormous clout in the church. They believed that matter was evil – a creation of the devil – and that spirit was good. You and I, according to Gnostic belief, are spiritual beings unfortunately trapped in the evil world of matter. The goal of human life, then, was to have as little to do with matter as possible, and return to the spirit realm that God inhabited. Look at the rich fool, the Gnostics would say. He lost his soul because he was up to his eyeballs in stuff. Don't be like him.

The Early Church countered the Gnostics by affirming the creation stories in Genesis: the devil didn't make the world, God did. And not only did God make it, God said it was good. Furthermore, God in Christ took on flesh, entered this world of matter, worked as a carpenter with wood and tools, multiplied loaves and fishes, and did not shun possessions. While it's safe to say that Jesus didn't own much, we do know that he owned a cloak that was worth owning, as evidenced by the soldiers who gambled for it at the foot of the cross. Far from demonizing the material order, Jesus made sacred use of it. He baptized with water, and on the night before he died, he took bread and wine and said "this is my body; this is my blood." Jesus saves us not from the world, but in it and through it. The creation is good. Matter is of God. In fact, we who dwell in time and space can know nothing of the spiritual unless God mediates it to us through the material.

God loves the world. God loves the bricks and mortar of the Habitat for Humanity house that we are building. God loves the wood and nails that comprise these ancient pews of Grace Church. God loves the flesh and blood of the people who sit in them. God loves stuff, and so do we! So today we give a rousing "two cheers" to all the crops and barns and oriental rugs and stained glass windows in the world that God has made and loves.

Wait a minute: two cheers? Why not three cheers? Jesus said, *"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."* This phrase from today's Gospel is just one of numerous times that Jesus warned of the dangers that come with money and possessions. Chief among those dangers is the way possessions – either in their abundance or in their lack – can cause us to focus our best energies on ourselves alone. Jesus condemned the rich farmer not because he was rich, not because he had a bumper crop, not even because he planned to build bigger barns. It wasn't what he had that was the problem. Rather, it was what he planned to do with what he had that caused his downfall. What did he plan to do? Nothing but serve himself.

As we listen in on the rich man's thoughts in the parable, we learn that the idea of sharing some of his excess crops never even entered his thinking. It never occurred to him that God might have blessed him with a good crop so that he might in turn bless those who hungered. Even his idea of bigger barns might have served the community in a time of need, but no such stewardship ever crossed the mind of the rich fool. He loved his stuff and that's where it ended. It was all about him. "I" and "my" are the most frequently recurring words in his short little speech. The rich man might well have profited from reading the portion of Ecclesiastes we heard today (chapters 1-2). The writer of that book toiled under the sun building houses, planting vineyards, making gardens and parks and pools. Yet he found that all his toil was vanity, a pointless chasing after the wind. Why? Because he did it all *for himself*.

In other parables Jesus labels certain characters as wicked. The man in today's parable is merely a fool. He's a fool because he's paying too high a price for his possessions. He's a fool because he's allowed his possessions to crowd out everything else in his life. He's a fool because he's forgotten how briefly we borrow the things that we call our own. We take none of it with us when we die. Death makes generous givers of us all. The matter of inheritance is writ large across the Scriptures we've heard today. On the giving end, the writer of Ecclesiastes laments that he has no control over how wise or foolish his heirs will be. On the receiving end we've heard about two brothers who valued their "stuff" more than they did each other. I hear Jesus telling us today how vain, how empty life becomes when our possessions become an end in themselves. They aren't as valuable as we make them out to be. They aren't worth the price of family relationships. They certainly aren't worth the price of your soul.

One of my professors in seminary had served as a priest in Uganda in the 1960s, and he wrote of a peasant woman who taught him a powerful lesson about possessions. She was a dabbler in the pagan cults of the region, relying on potions and curses to ward off evil spirits and enemies. Her most treasured belonging was an ancient, shiny, strangely shaped root about the size of a softball. The root was thought to contain a potent spirit, and whoever owned this thing could exercise great power with it. She had paid over one-hundred dollars for it – practically a life savings in that place and time.

One day the Anglican Archbishop was coming to the area where the woman lived in order to conduct Confirmation services. My professor went along with him. The ceremonies and speeches went on well into the evening, until people finally gathered around a huge bonfire to sing hymns. The peasant woman was there on the fringes of the crowd, with her root tucked under her garments. Suddenly she arose from her place and walked right up to face the Archbishop. She took out the root, and held it above her head. The people gasped because they knew what it was, and feared she might be about to curse either them or the Archbishop. But she shocked them all when she shouted, *Jesus lives. Burn it!* She handed the root to the Archbishop, who threw it into the fire.

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The story of the peasant woman is told by Philip Turner in *Sex, Money & Power*, Cowley Publications, 1985, p. 83.