

THE MYTH OF ALONENESS

The Rev. Julia Macy Offinger
Grace Church in New York
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
August 4, 2019

“And I will say to my soul, `Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” Luke 12:19

I have a confession to make to you today; there is nothing I enjoy more than relaxing, eating, drinking, and being merry. The prospect of those things being absolutely secure for many years would make my soul very well, indeed. So perhaps you, like I, can relate to the “rich fool” Jesus tells us about today, who only wants to make sure that he can do all of those fun things in his retirement. And my further confession is that of those four fun things—relaxing, eating, drinking, and being merry—I hold eating above all the rest. Sure, I love to relax and I’ll take a drink at the end of a long day, but there is nothing that makes me merrier than a good meal.

I have always loved food. I never went through a picky eater phase, and I’ve always been excited about special bites, by that I mean the kind of food you can only get at certain times or in certain places—a beignet in New Orleans, a baguette in Paris, a cider donut in New England in the early fall, a tomato in August. As a child, one of my favorite foods—believe it or not—was caviar. My grandmother would come over to our house for dinner and she would often bring a treat—a block of cheese, some crackers—for us to eat before dinner. On special occasions she would bring a caviar dip, which I now know was just cheap caviar mixed with sour cream. I would scoop it on crackers, much to the delight of any adults in the room. What a sophisticated palate she has, they would say.

Once, my uncle came back from a trip to Russia with a special tiny tin of beluga caviar. Before he even realized what was happening, I had heaped about half the tin on a cracker and swallowed it down. He was so mad, but I couldn’t understand it. It had been a delicious, special bite. And wasn’t that why he brought it? To be eaten?

I soon became interested in the stories of food, not only how to cook certain dishes, but reading cookbooks as if they were novels and watching cooking shows instead of soap operas, something I also learned from my grandmother. She and I would sit in her den on Saturday mornings with Julia Child and Jacques Pepin on in the background pouring through the pages of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. My comfort TV is still old episodes of *The French Chef*, and before every meal I still to this day will usually exclaim, “Bon Appetit!”

Reading and watching a lot of Julia Child got me interested in the history of food, why we eat what we eat. Was she really the person to bring French food to America? So I started to read lists of menus served at The White House to get a sense of how American food evolved, and I learned that it was actually Thomas Jefferson who is widely understood to have brought French food to America, popularizing ice cream, creme brulee, pastry, champagne and French fries.

So I’ve had all this food history in my head for awhile, but on vacation this summer, during a few weeks of relaxing, drinking, eating, and being merry, I read a book called *The Cooking Gene* by Michael W. Twitty, a book that combines this chef and food writer’s memoir growing up in the south with an exploration of African American culinary history and its influences on “American” food.

And in this book, I learned something that really should have been quite obvious to me for many years. I realized for the first time that it really wasn't Thomas Jefferson who brought all these foods over from France, it was actually his slave, James Hemings, a man who traveled with Jefferson to France and studied in the best culinary schools there. He is the one who created all the menus we now think of as Jefferson's. And perhaps you have heard that Thomas Jefferson invented macaroni and cheese? Of course, that was certainly Hemings. And of course all of these foods were equally informed by the African American and slave experience, by the generations of displaced people passing along the memories of African food one to the next.

What an obvious notion. Of course Thomas Jefferson himself was not in the kitchen deboning chicken or slowly churning custard into ice cream or rolling macaronis. "According to his household staff, Jefferson never entered the Monticello kitchen except to wind the clock."¹ And yet, why do I still sort of picture that in my head, Jefferson toiling away over an open flame, tasting sauce with a wooden spoon?

All of this makes me wonder about the rich fool from our gospel lesson today. Why does Jesus call this rich man a fool? Because everything he does in the story actually sounds rather wise and prudent to me: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: 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, be merry.'

I have to be honest to you, when I hear parables like this, I'm imagining this man tearing down his barns and building bigger ones. Him and a hammer and a ladder, a solitary and solo effort.

But that surely isn't what would be going on, right? It would be his household, his servants. Perhaps you could use the word slaves, but at best, pretty low paid workers. Many exploited, unnamed workers. This rich man would not lift a finger. And yet in his words we hear over and over again, I I I. I will do this. I will pull down my barns. I will store all my grain. I will say to my soul, soul

This is the parable of the rich fool. What is its lesson?

There's a common interpretation of this story that's about downsizing. There's a whole other sermon I could preach about Marie Kondo and the art of decluttering, right? I'm sure you're familiar with her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, or her show on Netflix? Because at first glance, it might seem that this is what Jesus is telling us with this parable, that we shouldn't go out and get more storage space, we should instead declutter our lives of possessions that we can't take with us to heaven. That earthly goods do nothing to help our relationship with God. Thank the extra grain and put it in the charity pile.

But I don't think that's really the point—I don't think that is why Jesus calls this man a fool. I don't think the sin is that he has too much grain. I don't think the sin is this successful business. I rather think the sin is his myth of aloneness. The idea that any one of us can do it on our own, the notion that this man alone is responsible for his success. That his grain is for him and only him. That his soul will be satisfied with stores of food, alone.

You can see it from the way Jesus leads in to the parable—Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend,

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/people-and-culture/food/the-plate/2016/04/13/thomas-jefferson-president-scholar-first-foodie/>

who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

The question is one of division—how do I get my family to divide, Jesus? Jesus' answer is that division is not what brings us close to God, rather it is relationship, it is union with each other that brings us close to God. Though you may be rich, you are a fool if you do not see that.

Can you feel the division right now? I feel it palpably in our country. Going to bed last night to the news stories of the shooting in El Paso, Texas, at a Walmart, where when the weather is good you can see the Texas Mexico border, 20 dead, 26 injured. Waking up to the news of another shooting in Dayton, Ohio, 9 dead, 16 injured. 251 shootings of more than 4 people in the 215 days of this year in this country.

We lament, we grieve, we wail. We are maybe frightened? We are maybe angry? We are maybe getting numb. And we come to church today for more than the headlines, we come for the Gospel. But what hope does this book have for us today? What is God's voice in this human mess?

God's call is twofold. It is first a reminder to us: that these events do not stand in isolation. They are not the product of solitary mad men, but a product of a breakdown in our system, in our society, a product of from division. Do not fall prey to the myth of aloneness, God reminds us in the Gospel today. Take the time to uncover the interconnectedness that leads people to act.

And God's call is next a call to the table, now. "This very night your life is being demanded of you," God says to the rich man. You are a fool if you think that means you have to do it on your own. It's why we come together in church, it's why the central symbol of our faith is a feast given to us by God. Because God's call to us is unity around a table brimming with food, now. A special bite, you can only get here, a foretaste of heaven here and now. Not to be enjoyed down the line all by yourself as a reward for a job well done, but as the fuel for you to go out into the world and do the job, do the unifying work God calls you to do, now.

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