

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - August 11, 2019
Planning for the Future
Psalm 107:1-9, 43 and Luke 12:13-21

Folks were always trying to triangulate Jesus - to bring him into the midst of a personal disagreement with the hope that he would serve as an arbitrator. And in today's second lesson, we find yet another example of that. A crowd - Luke says that it numbers in the thousands - is eagerly following him. Jesus has just concluded a teaching about right relationship with God when someone in the crowd interrupts by shouting out a question.

Today, we're accustomed to these kinds of exchanges. They happen all the time in the political sphere - at campaign rallies and town hall events. It is commonplace in democratic societies for people to speak out against laws that they feel are unjust. Dismayed, for example, by the staggering effects of gun violence, advocates are now calling for more stringent background checks and a ban on automatic weapons. Or, in response to rising economic inequality, others have contacted elected officials in the hope of amending existing tax laws. Or, challenged with a health care system that many claim is broken, countless proposals have addressed the issue of how to best care for those with medical needs in this country.

Jesus was no stranger to these kinds of encounters. Religious and political opponents often questioned him, hoping to trip him up. The desperately ill reached out to touch him and begged him to heal them. And curious onlookers peppered him with questions in an attempt to discern his true identity.

In this passage, the man who interrupts him is embroiled in an ugly domestic dispute. Specifically, he feels that he has been wronged by his brother. And having detected in Jesus a fairness of spirit, he now calls out to him to settle a dispute regarding an inheritance.¹ The law on this matter is clear. In those days, the elder brother received a double portion of the inheritance.² It certainly wasn't fair, and we can easily imagine how unpopular this part of the Deuteronomistic code must have been, particularly for younger siblings.

But, in this case, it appears that the older brother, now serving as the executor of the estate, has cut his younger sibling out entirely. Anxious and angry, the younger brother asks Jesus, in front of thousands of people, to share his thoughts. He's seeking a ruling on the long-held belief that the elder sibling should receive a double-

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 162.

² R. Alan Culpepper, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 213.

portion of the inheritance. And, specifically, he wants Jesus to condemn his brother for refusing to provide even that much.

In the Torah, Moses delved into these kinds of matters on several occasions. But, Jesus refuses to do so. Even though this younger brother may have had a legitimate case, Jesus still challenged him “to free himself from preoccupation with material things.”³ Thus, “rather than act as a judge, Jesus states a proverbial truth and elaborates with a parable.”⁴

Friends, how often have you either witnessed or heard about this kind of dispute? A loved one has just died. And, immediately, the family starts “haggling over furniture, dishes, silverware, house, land, and savings account left by the deceased.” When Jesus is asked to serve as a referee, he refuses; after all, who can judge whose greed is right?”⁵ “Jesus rejects the man’s request because he will not participate in satisfying the greed that he senses had prompted it. Instead of helping the man to get his inheritance, he points the man to a different understanding of life.” For “life is not to be valued or measured in terms of wealth or possessions.”⁶

³ Culpepper, *Connections*, 213.

⁴ Craddock, 163.

⁵ Craddock, 163.

⁶ Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), 255.

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a parable about a man who has amassed a great deal of wealth. “As Fred Craddock reminds us, “there is nothing here of graft or theft; there is no mistreatment of workers or any criminal act.” Instead, “sun, soil, and rain join” to provide him with a surplus.⁷ And, with more grain and goods than his existing barns can handle, the man decides to tear them down so that he can build larger ones in their place. He’s already mapped out the fantasy. With new barns to hold his wealth, he can take it easy and enjoy the future for the rest of his days.

The landowner in this parable “is careful and conservative,” and his rationale seems reasonable enough. Who among us hasn’t dreamed of taking an early retirement? But, “if he is not unjust, then what is he? He is a fool, says the parable. He lives completely for himself, he talks to himself, he plans for himself, he congratulates himself.”⁸ When he dies suddenly, Jesus asks, “For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”

Jesus’ parable touches on so many different topics: preoccupation with possessions, security in self-sufficiency, the grasp of greed, and the hollowness of hedonism.⁹ This message is certainly not easy to hear, for it reminds us of how

⁷ Craddock, 163.

⁸ Craddock, 163.

⁹ Culpepper, *Luke*, 257.

acquainted we are with anxiety. And it shines a very bright light on how often we misplace our priorities.

Even in wealthy countries like ours, many people live paycheck to paycheck - often wondering if they will ever break the cycle. Others have been saving for the future for a very long time. They're counting down the days until retirement. The tool shed that once sat in the backyard was demolished years ago - as soon as the ink had dried on the new promotion. And still others have convinced themselves that with a bit more work, they will finally live the good life.

A veteran chaplain once said, "I've sat by hundreds of deathbeds, and I have never heard even one person say, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'" Reflecting on the chaplain's words, Stephen Farris reminds us that "spending 'more time at the office' might be a contemporary way of saying spending 'more time building bigger barns.'" ¹⁰ Thus, if we are to take Jesus' words seriously, then we are wise to explore our own fears and anxieties about the future.

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁰ Stephen Farris, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 215.