

“On Living Beyond our Means”
by Rev. David J. Wood
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Luke 12: 13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But Jesus said to him, “Friend, 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.”

Then he told them a parable: “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.’ But 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?’

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

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The writer Isaac Asimov was best known for his science fiction. Several years ago I came across a story he told about a couple who were looking for a new home and they were convinced that their realtor had finally brought them to the house of their dreams. They settled on a price, finalized the purchase and moved in.

All was picture perfect...until in the middle of the night, they were rudely and abruptly awakened by the sound of a freight train...it sounded like it was coming through their bedroom...but, in truth, it was passing by not too many yards away.

Somehow they had missed that detail in their review of the property...and their realtor had failed to mention it.

The good news was, to their surprise, over time, they gradually adapted to the train’s mid-night passage. In time they learned to sleep right through it. All was well.

Until, that is, a few years later when, unbeknownst to them, the train schedule changed and the train no longer passed by in the middle of the night. At the stroke of midnight, on the first night of the train’s non-passing, the couple found themselves suddenly, even rudely, awakened by the silence.

Asimov says, “they were awakened by the sound of something missing.”

You can’t read this parable and not be struck by the sound of something missing...amidst all the rich man’s barn bulging abundance, there was so much he was missing and he seems blissfully and tragically unaware...

He’s convinced that all he’s missing is adequate storage space.

First and foremost, *others* are missing....

He is living a completely self-enclosed, self-centered, self-preoccupied existence. As someone once quipped, "The smallest package in all the world is the person who is all wrapped up in himself."

He's also missing a sense for his own life and, particularly, his own mortality. "Eat, drink, and be merry!"

It's interesting that in his quoting of this well know verse found in Isaiah, the final phrase of the saying is missing:

"...for tomorrow we die!"

And of course, *God* is missing from his awareness. We often talk of how suffering and hardship and tragedy turns one against God – even into an atheist. But Jesus had more warnings about how wealth, success, and abundance can cause one to forget God, to lose their senses....

The philosopher, Charles Taylor, writes about the conditions of late-modern life. A central feature, he claims, of late modern life, its default assumption is that we live within what he calls an "immanent frame." By that he means that we become conditioned to a way of living that is wholly within the bounds of what humans can learn, accomplish, create, discover...that there is no higher plane of existence, there is nothing beyond, there are no greater ENDS to live for or by. He names this as a "loss of transcendence."

It's in the cultural air we breathe.

By today's common sense, this man was no fool: he is prudent, strategic, successful, with goals & objectives, and he gets results!

How does his outlook differ from the American Dream:

"I have many good things – namely financial assets – stored up (invested) that I can draw upon for many years..."?

The psychologist, Victor Frankl, once made the observation about modern life that, "We have the means to live and no meaning to live by." I tend to agree but, I would change it a bit. I think just about everyone adopts some semblance of meaning, however inarticulate, to live by. The problem is that the meaning we adopt, is far too small...it shrinks our horizons...and our souls. It draws the circle of our awareness and concern tighter and tighter...like the character in our parable, it closes us off from the world beyond our own needs.

**We must learn how to live *beyond* our means:** not just inside them or for them...the means by which we live must always be related to greater ends...

I think it is fair to say, the character in our parable didn't live for money – or to even to fill his barns with grain. He lived to be free from anxiety, from scarcity, from vulnerability, from contingency.

It was his yearning for security, control, self sufficiency that caused him to be preoccupied with possessions.

A life free to be free of the vulnerabilities intrinsic to our human condition. Which, course, can be understood as chasing after a kind of transcendence...to transcend the human condition!

Of course, in the end, he failed.

Jesus calls us to another way to seeing ourselves and our lives,  
A way of life that not consumed with gaining more;  
A way of life not consumed with securing our lives against the uncertainties and precariousness  
of this life.

Jesus inaugurates a whole new vision of reality...one that breaks out and breaks through the  
assumptions & certainties that govern this world. In the verses that follow on from this parable,  
Jesus says:

*Don't keep striving for what you are to eat  
and what you are to drink  
and do not keep worrying.  
For it is the nations of the world that strive  
after all these things and your Father knows that you need them  
Instead, strive for God's kingdom  
and these things will be given to you as well...*

Church ought to be a place for counter narratives and stories. I have only been with you a short  
while. I'm still getting to know you. From what little I already know, within your life there is a  
lot of life that has been lived. There are a lot of stories to be told about how you have discovered  
and lived lives beyond your means. You have experienced the loss of spouses, of careers, of  
health...in so many ways there is much wisdom you have gained about the importance of  
depending upon one another and upon a sufficiency that comes by faith. My sense is there is  
much knowledge and wisdom contained in the stories you have to tell. Church needs to be a  
place where such stories are freely and abundantly shared.

My sense is that you are a community that has learned to live loosely with possessions and give  
generously to those in need. As people of faith, we are not called to spend like there is no  
tomorrow...  
but we are called to give generously as those who know that tomorrow,  
just like today, belongs to God and to God's kingdom.  
A kingdom not of scarcity but of abundance

I heard a story somewhere in my past about a missionary family in China in the late 1940's, at  
the time of the Communist Revolution when all the missionaries were expelled from the  
country.

A soldier appeared at the family's door and told them they had 24 hours to pack their things  
and prepare to be deported. On top of that, they were informed that they would be allowed to  
depart with no more than 300 pounds of belongings.

For the next hours the parents and their two children negotiated over what belongings should  
be included in the 300 pound weight limit.  
After many hours of tense and difficult, sometimes contentious deliberations, they arrived at a  
final determination of their worldly goods that would meet the 300 pound limit that had been  
imposed on them..

At the appointed time the government officials returned and asked if they were ready to go.  
"Yes," declared the father.

"Have you weighed everything?"

"Yes," the father assured the soldiers. There was even a hint of pride in his voice.

Then the official asked, "Did you weigh the children?"

All of a sudden all those things that had seemed so valuable and so necessary meant nothing. They were tossed aside and replaced by what carried real value and meaning for their lives. Their logic of what mattered most was upended in an instant.

Sometimes, without realizing it, we succumb to a logic of value that we don't even realize we have adopted...we need to be awakened from our acquiescence to a way of life...a way of valuing that shrinks our souls...even in the midst of our abundance...

Sometimes, we need to be awakened by the sound of something missing.

BEWARE, Jesus warned his followers...

"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed  
for one's does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

In the end, as in our beginning...all we have is the one who has us.

At the time of his wife death, E.B. White described his wife,  
Katherine, in the following terms:

"[She was] a member of the resurrection conspiracy,  
[she belonged to] the company of those who plant seeds of hope  
under the dark skies of grief or oppression,  
going about their living and dying until,  
no one knows how, when or where,  
the tender Easter shoots appear  
and a piece of creation is healed."

Now that has the sound of a life worth living...a life that is rich towards God:

*as members of the resurrection conspiracy  
planting seeds of hope...  
so that a piece of creation would be healed. Amen.*