***It’s the Economy, Stupid!***

A Sermon Preached at LPCC on January 21, 2017

Luke 12:16-21

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 According to today’s text Jesus said: “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.”

 This actually reminds me of another story, the moral of which is this: sometimes, a bigger barn is a good thing. This story isn’t about a grain barn, but a chicken barn. You see, the summer before Irene and I were married, Irene’s parents bought a chicken farm near Cobourg, Ontario.

 For dad, it was a full-time hobby farm after years of running a successful masonry contracting business. The farm was beautiful. Set in the rolling Ganaraska hills it was all pond, forest, laneway, and split rail fence. Oh, and it also had an ancient chicken barn.

 The barn was a pain. It had half-a-dozen levels which made feeding and catching chickens difficult. After the chickens shipped, dad had to clean up the chicken slop with buckets carried up and down ladders. Unpleasant, to say the least.

 So, soon after he bought the farm, dad built a larger barn. In the new barn, all the chickens were accessible via ground-level doors. Watering and feeding were automated, and a tractor could shovel away the chicken mess after.

 And then, just days before the new barn was finished, the old barn burned to the ground. That was sad, because the old barn had character. On the plus side, however, the old barn was well insured, which helped when it came to paying for the new barn!

 Naturally, the fire marshal investigated the fire. It all seemed a bit too convenient. But my father-in-law was as straight an arrow and the cause of the fire was soon discovered to be an ancient, now fried, electrical panel.

 So, sometimes a newer, bigger barn is a good thing—especially when the insurance pays for it. And my little story illustrates that the parable that is our topic for today needs to be read carefully if we are going to understand it properly. Experience teaches us that bigger barns, or wealth, or more than enough food, or goods that need to be stored—these are not necessarily the main issue when it comes to barns. Listen . . . the parable continues.

 The man who had so much grain, and so much stuff said to himself: “‘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.’”

 Aha—it is not grain, or the stuff, or the barns that are the problem here. It is the attitude of the owner. “I will say to my soul, Soul! You have ample goods! So, relax, eat, drink, and be merry.”

 This, of course, is the thinking of an absolutely self-centered, perhaps narcissistic, certainly Dionysian, life-is-a-party animal. It isn’t his stuff that is the issue, it is that he thinks his stuff is life. He thinks his stuff loves him as he loves it. He—as Eric Trump said while defending his father of the charge of racism—he sees only one color, green. The green of cash; and, I’m sure, green the color of envy, at least when he looks into the mirror. Not much to build a life or happiness on.

 So, “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.”

 No, instead of living for our cash or our stuff as our life and love, we must live richly toward God, says Jesus, whom we follow.

 We must live richly toward God. Hold that thought. I’m coming back for it, in a minute.

 I was being a bit unfair when I mentioned Eric Trump. What he actually said is, "My father sees one color, green. That's all he cares about. He cares about the economy."

 In saying so, Eric Trump was actually echoing another politician, Bill Clinton, who famously touted the phrase “It’s the economy, stupid,” in the 1992 election campaign.

 It’s a powerful idea. Presidential popularity and Canadian elections depend, largely, on how the electorate thinks the economy is doing. But especially on how the economy is doing for them, personally. When Abacus did a survey, about year ago, about the issues that kept Canadians awake at night, the number one issue was the economy. But when you explore what Canadians actually mean by “the economy,” they will tell you they lie awake worrying about their own personal economic issues—pocket book issues: how expensive is hydro? Are grocery prices rising? What about property taxes? Canadians lie awake wondering if they are going to lose their jobs, if they will have enough to retire on, if they can live on minimum wage and some alimony, and whether or not they can send their kids to a decent school.

 But, in fact, we all know that how we are doing personally is not necessarily a good measure for the economy as a whole. The economy is really about all of us and how we’re doing all together. It is the sum total of our spending and saving, our taxes and confidence, our regulatory laws and the quality of our bureaucracy; the economy is about whether or not we can depend on infrastructure, whether or not the single payer health care system we love gives Canada an advantage when trying to get Amazon to set up here . . . and so on. Of course, the poor (and the rich) that we always have with us are personally concerned with what is in their barns, if they have one. But beyond our personal fears—there is a real national and international economy that will roll on, for better or worse, whether or not we are poor or rich, worried or not.

 And it is in this situation that Jesus says we should live richly toward God.

 Look, this parable is usually taken as a warning against selfish consumerism, as a warning against putting our hope for joy and love in things rather than in ideals or loving or something like that. And if you read this parable that way, as a warning against misplaced priorities and personal greed, I think that might be a good thing.

 But Jesus is actually hoping for something positive for everyone here. He sums the parable up by saying we should live richly toward God—by which he means, as he always does, that we must love God by loving our neighbor.

 So when it comes to the economy, it isn’t just about how we are doing, as important as that is for each of us individually; if we are to love God by loving our neighbors, when it comes to the economy we need to think about how our neighbors, rich and poor, are all doing, all together; and about how the planet and the tribes are doing; and about what the future of economic migrants from Africa might be if Africa itself was a wealthier place—or if Afghanistan or Syria or Bangladesh were wealthier places. When we think about the economy, we need to think not just locally—personally—but globally.

 This parable suggests not only that life isn’t about hoarding stuff, but rather, positively, economically, we ought to work for the well-being of our neighbours. And we do that best by pulling on whatever economic levers we have our hands on. Do you pull or invest or vote or make corporate decisions merely for your own private, or perhaps your stock-holders’ well-being? Or do you pull levers so as to make the system we are part of richer, fairer, and more loving for your neighbors, too?

 I am not promoting, by the way, a socialist heaven. I am not promoting Conservatives over Liberals. We will all, always, disagree about what is best, policy-wise, for the economy—especially when it comes to details. It is not my business, as a minister, to tell you which nation to boycott or which pipeline will be best for a world struggling with global warming—even though I have strong opinions about such things. It is my business, however, as each of us struggles with determining which policies are best, to remind us all of the foundational values and ideals we hold together.

 And the ideal of living richer to God and the neighbours God gives us does mean that if we’re going to be lying awake at night worrying about the economy, we ought to be lying awake worrying not just for ourselves first, or America first and not just for what is in Canada’s national interest, but what the economy means for all of our neighbours around the world.

 And just look at yourselves. You are sort of amazing. You, for the most part, do not have to go to bed worrying about whether or not you are going to go hungry in retirement. But you know your MP and MPP. Some of you know the Premier or Prime Minister or Finance Minister. Not a few of you have influential friends, belong to political parties, or help run important industries. We go to cocktail parties with Chief Counsels and CEOs. We invest in new industries or not, in companies that move their wealth off shore to evade taxes or not, that do business in Asia or South America honestly or not.

 Sure, none of us is *the* leader of the economy. Altogether, however, and each of us in our own small way, have a say. We have economic pull. Living richly towards God? Well, if you have enough, more or less, it’s the whole economy, the economy of all Canadians and all world citizens, that ultimately matters most. It is that economy which ought to keep us awake, and it is that economy where we can best live richly toward God and neighbor.

 You see, the bigger barns we ought to strive to build are bigger barns not for our souls alone, but for all human souls.