

Exploring the Scriptures:
Rich Towards God

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by Blair Odney

Luke 12:13-21

I come into the pulpit this morning with more questions than answers. Like last week, I find myself wondering about my changing theology and the teachings of the church. Today Jesus lands squarely on the topic of money, and the ethics that direct our use of this source of energy. What I do know is that preachers talking about money typically doesn't go down well with the folks in the pew. My friend Ralph Milton used to say, we don't have money problems at all...in North America?? Not at all. The problem is getting money from our pockets to the places where it will be best used. I'm a little conflicted this morning. I think all I can do is provide some time and space for us to ask a bunch of questions. I think it's because I live in a very wealthy and yet very deluded North America – the wealthiest of all societies that continually reminds me I don't have enough. Sometimes I believe what advertisers tell me. So I stand here a little nervous. And as I read the story, Jesus isn't particularly helpful; at least not in the beginning. He's not even following his own advice.

In the story Stan read for us, someone from the back calls out. Don't you love that – nameless, faceless, hidden? How often do we bring our complaints from within the safety of a crowd? Someone from the back pipes up; from the question asked it's probably a younger brother. His oldest brother is about to get twice as much out of his father's estate as the rest of the siblings. That's how it was in first century Palestine when your father died. The eldest son got twice as much as everyone else, but also assumed all of the responsibility for his father's family. But, now, the younger brother, from the back, is protesting.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Jesus doesn't want to take the bait. He doesn't want to move outside of his own mission specialty. If people ask about healing, or teaching, or proclaiming the Word of God, okay. But don't ask him to be the arbitrator between disputes. Good advice Jesus. Stick to your specialty. (Good advice, Blair...don't talk about money) If he stopped there and carried on with what he had been speaking about, great. But no...he has the nerve to speak to the question even though he's not sure what he's going to say. I imagine the story sounding something like this. Stan didn't read what was going just prior to this little clip, but it's always important to get the context. You see Jesus was warning about the judgment of the temple.

When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say."

Someone in the crowd (interrupted and) said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

And then I imagine Jesus turning back to what he had been speaking about before. But he stops; you can almost hear his wheels turning as he thinks about that question. It's almost as if he interrupts himself..."Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you? "but I will say this? Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: etc.etc. etc

Maybe Jesus was about to test his earlier thought, that the Holy Spirit will give to him what he needed in that moment to speak well. In my skittishness this morning, I'm trusting in the same gift now.

I remember when Sheila's mom died in 2005. She had been living in one of those really nice assisted living places with her own really lovely apartment but with her meals cooked in the common dining room. Activities were provided and family could come and go whenever they wanted. But if there was ever a problem the facility staff could check in on you right away. It was expensive, but it was great. We often laughed because as a minister's wife, it was the most opulent place she ever lived...and yet she was there alone; she had moved there after Sheila's dad died.

In her dying and because of Sheila's dad's very smart financial management, the five Vanstone daughters were each left with an inheritance. It was supposed to be there to take care of Sheila's mom, but she died way earlier than anyone anticipated and the estate went to the girls.

In order to receive their portion of the estate, each of the girls had to open an investment account with the Investors Group, the financial institution that had been contracted to manage the estate. Well our account manager was a newbie in Vernon...and a newbie to the business of estate planning and wealth management. The day we met her, she suggested that in receiving the inheritance we begin a wealth growth account that would cost us the equivalent of our monthly mortgage payment, but when we were 65, would provide us with a lump sum payment of a half a million dollars. No kidding...a half million dollars. And she showed us how we could do it.

For the next six months, Sheila and hummed and hawed. Should we or shouldn't we? Do we tie up a significant portion of our monthly cash flow for the sake of what seemed like a huge amount of money? We became interested in how investment portfolios worked, how money grew, where the best wealth management products were. Our whole life became centered around a fictitious \$500,000 that we would have when I turned 65 in 18 years.

And then we thought: “do we need a half a million dollars when we’re 65?” Do we need it badly enough to tie up all of our cash flow for 18 years?

‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

I really don’t know where I’m landing this morning, because I like my creature comforts. And many of you here are living comfortably only because you made a similar decision. In light of the cost of living in Canada I understand why we prepare for our retirements in the way we do. I like what this source of energy can do for me. I know I am much more comfortable today than when I was a ministry student making \$15,000 a year 12 years ago. Certainly, I’m more comfortable now than I was then, and certainly that lump sum when I’m 65 might seem like a great thing. But am I any happier now than I was then, and will I be any happier when I’m 65 with that lump sum payment?

I told you, I’m not landing anywhere this morning because I’m just living with a bunch of questions. In the end, Sheila and I didn’t make that investment decision. We made a different investment decision, so you’ll understand why I’m a little conflicted. I’m living with the questions.

These are the same questions I think about when I consider the wealth we as a congregation are sitting on with the potential redevelopment of our property. In the most recent report we received from the Redevelopment Committee, we learned that we have the potential to realize a significant cash injection...in the millions...and yet, with great wisdom and great care we are asking ourselves...what would we do with it? What would be different in our spiritual health with the influx of that kind of cash? Or rather, will we have stored up our treasures for ourselves but not be rich toward God? I hope to explore this question in a two part sermon series beginning next week, so I’ll leave it at that.

What I’ve come to realize is these are baby boomer questions; wealthy, privileged, influential baby boomer questions. Baby boomers have affected the North American economy more than any other generation and now we’re getting ready to retire. We will affect the cost of housing, the availability of health services, the availability of travel options and the money markets so we can make sure that the wealth we’ve grown pays us.

I was in conversation with a young man recently who told me how angry he was with the baby boomers. Self centered, individualistic, greedy. He said to me, they have not left the world in a better state than when they inherited it. They ask questions about what to do with their money, but they don’t ask questions about what do with the earth? Not only that, this young man has to direct his life so that he is equipped with the education and the skills to join with his generation to clean up our mess.

And he's under no delusion that he'll get it done in his own lifetime. He just knows that if he doesn't get it done, the people of this earth are doomed.

Even our oldest son Jordan, who now works on Vancouver Island for the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, is in the business of teaching people about the goodness of the earth so that they may come to love it and then protect it. He has similar anger which he's turned into something: "People can't love the earth, Dad, if they don't know it. I want to teach them about it."

Sally McFague is theologian in residence at Vancouver School of Theology. In her book, *Models of God* she uses a metaphor for the 21st century: The earth is God's body. Now all metaphors break down, but if we were to dance with this image that the earth is God's body and think about the young man who shared his assessment of how baby boomers have treated God's body, it's not much of an inheritance to leave behind to be divided...is it?

You'll understand why I said my questions about money are baby boomer questions. Self focused, and frankly self delusional. With two costly, messy, ecologically disastrous oil spills in one year, we simply do not have a choice any longer. My cash flow now needs to be about healing the earth. I need to be paying taxes on my gas to support clean air. I need to be paying more for local vegetables. I need to put low flow toilets in my house. I need to replace all my windows. I need to move to cleaner energy for heating my home. And I need to encourage my neighbors to do likewise. This very night my life is being demanded of me.

As a Christian community, the body of Christ alive in this world, about to re-create ourselves in full view of watching neighbors, we have an opportunity to give witness to our creed – to live with respect in creation. We can no longer store up riches for ourselves, we must be rich towards God, and for today and for decades to come, the earth, which is in peril, is God's body. May God help us as we respond diligently and with haste. May God help us if we don't. Amen.