

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

In this week's gospel we talk about money. In many cultures, including in Canada, talking about money, your own wealth or lack of it, is not considered to be a polite topic of conversation. It's a private matter. But in this gospel reading, a man asks Jesus about his inheritance. Clearly, he wants more money. The way the Torah law is written, an inheritance would be split so that the firstborn son receives twice as much as the other sons. So, if it's just the man and his brother, the firstborn receives two thirds and the second son, one third. It's not as if this man who is complaining has received no inheritance; it's just less than his brother. We are not told why the man wants more money. But his interaction with Jesus reflects his entitled attitude. And Jesus sees greed in the man's heart and says, 'for a man's life doesn't consist of the abundance of the things which he possesses.' The man addresses Jesus as teacher, but he does not ask for instruction – he just tells Jesus what he wants and demands that Jesus does his bidding. Jesus could have engaged with the man to remind him of the Torah law but instead draws out this discussion into a teaching moment for the man and all the others present.

Jesus tells a parable about a rich man wanting to build bigger barns.

The parable involves a farmer who is already rich. By good luck, good weather or good management, his land has yielded very plentiful crops this year. So much so, that his barns are not big enough to store them. He figures that if he tears down his barns and builds bigger ones, he will have enough food stored up for many years and then he can relax, eat, drink and be merry. But God says to him 'You fool. This very night you are going to die, so what will happen to the abundance you are about to store?' God basically says, 'you can't take it with you.'

The final comment in the parable is ²¹ So it is, with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.' What then does Jesus accuse this man of? Where is the man going wrong?

The most obvious message is about the farmer's greed and selfishness. We are all tempted to believe that we can find true security in wealth. But faith in wealth crowds out faith in God. Also, the farmer could have given away his extra crops to needy families or sold them and given the money to others. In this case, however, it's not money that is the problem, but love of money. 1st Tim. 6:10 says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

Why do we want to accumulate money and 'stuff?' It's not only that we find security in wealth. Some think that having a lot of 'stuff' satisfies our need to fill voids in our lives, and accumulating earthly treasure is one-way we humans try and do it, even though it is futile. If you have ever read the novel 'Silas Marner' by George Eliot, you will see this pattern. Silas is falsely accused of theft and must leave his village with its connections to friends, God and his chapel. He moves to a village some distance away and isolates himself, working as a weaver. Over time he accumulates wealth but is socially isolated and spends all his free time counting his gold. It fills the void. But eventually his gold is stolen, but he finds social connection in adopting an orphaned child and becoming part of the community.

Returning to our gospel reading – although the interpretation of this story and the parable are clear and obvious, there are some puzzling aspects (as always!).

Remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers but eventually becomes powerful in the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh. It's a story that starts with the best intentions but ends up enslaving both the Egyptians and eventually also Joseph's Jewish family and their descendants.

After interpreting one of Pharaoh's dreams, it's clear that there will be a seven-year famine in Egypt. Joseph is made governor, and in preparation for the famine, begins to store up food so that people in the country will not starve. Fine so far – wise plan. Joseph also brings his entire family to Egypt to escape the famine. Also, good idea. But what happens next? The famine eventually comes, and the people of Egypt and Joseph's family do not starve, as they are able to buy the food that was stored. But eventually their money runs out and the Egyptians have to give up their land in exchange for food. They are allowed enough seeds to grow crops when the famine ends. They may keep a small part of the crop but must give all the rest to Pharaoh. They have become slaves to the Pharaoh and to Joseph the governor. After the death of Joseph, comes the ascension of a new Pharaoh who does not know Joseph. This new Pharaoh fears the growing number and strength of the Israelites and their potential to join Egypt's enemies. To control them, the Pharaoh enslaves them, forcing them into hard labour building the cities of Pithom and Rameses. It's of course Moses who leads them out of slavery and to the land of Caanan.

We can assume that Joseph initially had the best of intentions in storing up food for a famine, but it's easy to see how greed sets in. Maybe God would also say that Joseph and Pharaoh were rich fools like the farmer in the parable. Making the Egyptians slaves because of their need for food was not a good outcome.

What today's parable is saying is that the rich fool derived security, comfort and meaning from his abundance. But things cannot provide real security, comfort and meaning. Only God can. The rich farmer could have shared his wealth without expecting any return of money or goods but instead kept it all in his selfish desire for comfort. Wealth itself is not evil, but the way he treated it was. He functioned out of a theology of scarcity and not of abundance.

As the US writer Anne Lamott puts it, “You can tell if people are following Jesus, because they are feeding the poor, sharing their wealth, and trying to get everyone medical insurance.”

And one final amazing thing about the abundant generosity of God, is that it is never exhausted, it never runs out, and it is never too late to accept it and act on it. Jesus warns us, “Don't be a fool! Be rich toward God!”

AMEN