

For various reasons I have moved about a dozen times in my life. You would think having to pack and unpack over and over would have taught me to buy less stuff, and I do think maybe my design aesthetic is a little more minimalist than some, but I've always mainly thought the problem was not all the stuff but all the moving. So I struggle with today's gospel reading, because it's clear that the rich man in the story is not the protagonist, but part of me thinks, as long as he didn't have to pack up all his grain and goods in a U-Haul and drive it to a whole new barn, what's the problem, really? Didn't he just do what most people try to do: work, save, set aside a little nest egg for retirement, then kick back and relax? This is only one of the places in Luke's gospel that Jesus proves he did not invent, inspire, endorse, or even tolerate the Protestant work ethic.

Much like the story of Mary and Martha, this passage begins with a character triangulating Jesus into an argument in which he has no intention of participating, at least not the way the petitioner hopes. A man, apparently of some means since his family owns land, asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him. I'm always amused by Jesus' answer: *Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?* ...because, well, God. But perhaps Jesus' point is not that he doesn't have the jurisdiction so much as he doesn't have any interest in taking sides between these wealthy brothers. Although scripture shows us that God is keenly invested in justice, making sure those who have enough are able to get even more does not seem to be the truest revelation of godly righteousness.

Now, the man wouldn't have known that Jesus was the Son of God, but he would have known Jesus as a popular spiritual teacher. He fights his way through the crowd and manages to capture Jesus' attention, only to ask him about a property dispute. It would be as if one of us got an audience with the pope or the Dalai Lama and instead of asking about inner peace or achieving enlightenment, we asked them to settle an argument over our great-aunt's will. Jesus' response suggests that this may not be the first place God intends for us to focus all our time, effort, and energy.

Jesus cautions against all kinds of greed and measuring one's life by the abundance of possessions. That is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with abundance or even an abundance of possessions. After all, scripture continually describes God as a god of abundance. And even the resources themselves are not the problem. God created humans in community, making commerce an inherent part of life. We're not meant to do everything for ourselves alone: growing all our food, butchering our meat, manufacturing our own tools, building, plumbing, wiring our houses, weaving fabric and sewing our clothes, providing a comprehensive education to our children, caring for our own medical needs when we're sick. We use possessions and money to buy or trade what we need within community because we were not created to be completely independent.

But that idea of community is conspicuously absent from Jesus' parable. The rich man only speaks about himself to himself...*I will do this...I will do that...I will say to my soul...* He never acknowledges the labors he certainly would have needed to help him plant, tend, and harvest a large enough crop that he could live off of it for many years. He never mentions paying a more generous

wage to these workers who were at least partly responsible for this abundant harvest. The man seems to have no family, since God asks who will end up with all the man's property once he's gone; normally that would be family, relations, business partners, some kind of organization or foundation which the man would have supported during his life. Yet there is no community to which he is connected; it's just him and his grain and his goods.

If you've heard me say it once, you've heard me say it a dozen times: when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he's not referring to the place we go when we die but the community in which we live here and now. I have a colleague who has stopped using the term *kingdom*, instead opting to translate it *kin-dom*, to better emphasize our role and responsibility to one another. This parable was not a cautionary tale about where the rich man was going; it was an indictment of him wasting the opportunity to live into the kingdom when he had the chance. Remember when *giving* Christmas gifts started to mean at least as much to you as receiving them? Imagine what it would have been like for the rich man to have shared his abundance, to have witnessed the gratitude of those in need when he helped to ensure that they had enough. Focused solely on himself, he never enjoyed that experience.

Jesus cautions against all kinds of greed—which is not just an action but a way of looking at the world. I was reminded of this during our trip to Washington last week when we visited the Holocaust Memorial Museum. One of the newer exhibits explored America's response to the crisis: our reluctance to enter the war and our strict adherence to immigration policies that denied refuge even to those who had managed to escape to our shores—forcing refugees to sail back to Europe where they eventually perished. The propaganda of the day cautioned that new immigrants would jeopardize employment and other opportunities for Americans—even as soldiers vacated their civilian jobs and Rosie had to learn how to rivet. Whether as individuals or as a society, storing up abundance for ourselves almost always diminishes life for others.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is simultaneously comforting to the afflicted and afflicting to the comfortable. And if the brother arguing with Jesus about his inheritance is any indication, we might not always see ourselves in the same place that Jesus sees us on that spectrum between comfortable and afflicted. Even yet, there is still good news, because brothers who demand their share of the inheritance, even the ones who squander it all in dissolute living and end up in pig troughs, find not just a Father who is willing to welcome them back, but a God who eagerly runs out to meet them. May we confess the fear that keeps us focused on ourselves above our community; may we resist the urge to define our lives by the abundance of our possessions; and may we give thanks to God who has met us where we are to teach us to trust in his abundant treasures.