

We have two rather unsettling lessons before us this morning. We hear about work, about accumulating wealth, and about death. What could be more unsettling than that assortment of topics? Certainly the words about work intrigued me, particularly since I am still gainfully employed, but my husband and many of my friends and peers, including many of you, are retired. Which means that I and other employed persons here this morning are still engaged in what Ecclesiastes describes as “this unhappy business that God has given human beings”, while those retired are more in the idyllic zone that the rich man in our Gospel lesson described in this way: “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” If I took those two verses to heart, I’d have to say that employed people like me have good reason to envy retired people who are no longer employed. But my honest observation would be that neither work nor retirement are quite so clear cut as those two verses might suggest. Many of us do not find our work to be merely thankless and painful toil; and not every retired person seems to be involved in relaxing, eating, drinking and being merry; at least not all the time! There’s also an interesting contrast between wisdom and folly in these two lessons. Our Ecclesiastes lesson was written by an esteemed and wise teacher, while the rich man in our gospel lesson is described as a fool. Kind of makes me think about attitudes towards work, and also about where most of us would fall on that continuum between wisdom and folly. This merits further investigation.

I’m sure you noticed that our Old Testament lesson from Ecclesiastes this morning, written several thousand years ago, is kind of a downer. The Teacher, as he

calls himself in the opening verse, is *not* happy with his work. There *have* always been those who disliked their jobs and there *always will be* those who dislike their jobs. And no job, however ideal, can be enjoyable all of the time. Of course, the Teacher didn't just *dislike* his job, he tells us he *hated* his work. He lists several reasons—a worker's days are full of pain, the work itself is vexing or frustrating, and problems on the job keep you lying awake at night--so there's just no break from the toil and misery of it all.

Furthermore, and this really seemed to bother the Teacher, you can't take it with you, as we would say. Your work and the results and rewards of your work can't stay with you forever. You die, and someone else reaps the results and rewards of your efforts. And that someone else may or may not be deserving, and they may or may not make wise use of your gains. So, what's the point? asked the Teacher. It's all vanity, all emptiness, all for nothing. Hardly a very positive take on work.

Our Gospel lesson also offers up some thoughts on work, although it particularly focuses on the accumulation of the gains from one's work. Jesus tells a parable, and I think we want to take note about how Jesus begins this parable. He uses strong language. He says, "Take care! Be on your guard!" Jeez, you'd think he was warning us about something that mattered. I'd use language like that if I was telling a child never to accept a ride from a stranger. "Take care, be on you guard!" suggests *real* peril to me. And yet Jesus doesn't follow up with a warning to avoid dark alleys or not to accept candy from strangers; *his* urgency is in regards to *greed*, of all things. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed" he tells us. Is greed that *dire* a threat? From the way Jesus talks, you'd think greed imperiled our very *souls*; and that's *exactly* what he does think.

The well-being of our souls depends on our being on guard against greed, and yet greed is as common as oxygen molecules; it practically makes the world go round, we might think. Jesus is way out of step here with 21st C. American culture, and he was out of step with 1st C. Palestinian culture, too, where extreme wealth was much less common than it is here, and this rich man would certainly have been the *envy* of all who knew him.

Let's begin our examination of the parable by wiping out our preconceptions about this rich man. Since we know Jesus regards him as a fool, we start out with a negative perception, but let's put that away for a moment. He's not such a bad guy, is he? We learn that his land produced abundantly. That's to his credit, isn't it? I'm not suggesting he worked his land all by himself; as a rich man he likely had peasants doing the hard labor. Nevertheless, he has made his fortune through his management and oversight of this land; he didn't just win the 1st C. Palestinian Powerball---he *earned* his money through the production of his crops. He then faces the dilemma of what to do with all the extra produce he has; it overflows his usual storage bins, it's certainly more than he can immediately use or sell; he needs to a place to store it for a time. Showing both resourcefulness and a willingness to invest in order to grow his business, he decides to tear down his inadequate barns and build larger ones in order to have room to store all his grain and all his goods. Seems logical. After all, he's planning for the future. And he then goes on to dream about his retirement, which all of us who aren't yet retired, also like to do. Having built his bigger barns and stored his future security there, he will then say to his soul, "Soul, you are set now for years: relax, eat, drink and be merry!"

Excellent! Sounds like a retirement plan to me! Sign me up!

But, now is where harsh reality enters in. Because the rich man is going to die, this very night, before he gets to enjoy all the perks of his retirement and his stored-up riches. And we all know people who fall ill or have heart attacks or strokes shortly after retirement, and it always seems so unfair and cruel and ironic. Not only will the rich man be *robbed* of these pleasures, so to speak, but God is not kind in his assessment of the rich man: “*You fool!*”, God declares. “This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” If this kind of scenario doesn’t drive home the fleeting nature of riches, what does? It’s the same observation that was made by the teacher in the lesson of Ecclesiastes, our Old Testament lesson for today: he works, he toils, he dies, and all he works for gets passed on to others who may not even appreciate it. Are these upbeat texts or what?

But let’s return to our question of why this rich man is a fool and whether we are likewise, a fool. Is it because he’s rich? No. Is it because he has succeeded beyond his expectations? No. And that should be some comfort to many of us, because certainly by the standards of our world and history, most of us have some measure of success and riches. That does *not* make us fools, at least no in and of itself. No, the rich man is a fool for two reasons: He thinks it’s all about him, and he too much sacrifices the present for the future.

How do we know the rich man thinks it’s all about him? In every statement he makes, he uses only one pronoun: “I” “What should *I* do, *I* have no place to store *my* crops? *I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and *I* will store *my* grain in bigger barns and *I* will say to *my* soul, blah, blah, blah.” *It’s all about him.* There’s no room in his

reasoning for anyone else. And this becomes more evident if we ponder what this rich man might have said *instead*. What if he had instead said something like this? “I am reaping the benefits of a tremendous harvest. Thank You, God, for good soil and seasonable weather and the means to plant and harvest this land, over which You have made me a steward. I have so much more than I need or can store---what shall I do? I will increase the wages of all my field workers; after all, I wouldn’t be where I am today without *their* hard work. I will increase my giving to the Temple and to the poor; after all, God has blessed me in order that I may be a blessing to *others*. And while I will responsibly save for my future, I will also enjoy life right *now*, today, because I don’t know how much time I have left in this life and that’s out of my control.” See how different that sounds? And how much wiser and more realistic? Do any of us really succeed *solely* on our own without the blessing of God, the assistance of others, and even some random good luck? Aren’t we repeatedly urged throughout Scripture to contribute to the *common* good and to use our blessings to bless *others*? Isn’t it, in fact, *not* all about us? And isn’t everything we are, own, and enjoy, ultimately a gift from God? That’s a huge perception shift that alters how we view our means. The rich man had not made that perception shift. The rich man thought only of himself and forgot about the place of God in his life and the importance of the community around him. *That* made him a fool. He placed his trust in his success and his material abundance rather than in God and faith...which makes him, in Jesus’ words, “one who stores up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God”.

But the other foolish thing about this rich man is that he seems to be all about the future rather than the present moment. In this way, he may resemble the Teacher of our first lesson from Ecclesiastes. What especially bothers the Teacher is that he is getting no enjoyment out of the *present* and is focused mostly on what will happen to the result of his labor in the *future*, after his death. He's not stopping to smell the roses, to appreciate the sunlight sparkling on the water, to experience the warmth and fun of comradery with others, or to thank God for his blessings. Likewise, the rich man in our Gospel lesson is also putting off that time of relaxing, eating, drinking, and being merry until after he's done working, until his retirement. And then, irony of ironies, his retirement never happens; his life is over before he really gets to live it well. Is that any kind of way to appreciate the gifts of God, which are so much given to us in the *present* moment? Given in the "now" to be appreciated, enjoyed, and shared in this now? As JRR Tolkien wrote in *The Lord of the Rings*, 'If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.' And it would, wouldn't it? If instead of waiting to *the future* to relax, to find pleasure in food, drink, song, friendship, and the beauty with which God has drenched the world around us, we did all of that in the *present*, it *would* be a merrier world. If instead of working ourselves into miserable states of fatigue and anxiety, planning for some far-flung day that may or may not ever come, we instead simply found joy in our present blessings and balanced that workload with a lifestyle that also makes room for gratitude and community, it *would be a* merrier world. A more blest world. A wiser world. A world in keeping with God's vision. And if we can take to heart these lessons of Scripture: to place our trust in God rather than in material

abundance, to see that it's not all about us, and to find reasons for joy and gratitude in the present moment, *we* would be wiser *people*. One who is wise takes God into account. One who is wise recognizes all they have is gift from God, and they are stewards of those gifts. One who is wise recognizes that they are blest to be a blessing to others. One who is wise looks to God for security rather than material abundance. We are wise when we make that perception shift that allows us to see God blesses us now, to find joy and appreciation in the present moment. Like St. Patrick in our sermon hymn, we pray for that perception shift to occur within our selves: "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart. Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art." Amen.