

Sermon on Luke 12:13-21
for Advent Lutheran Church; Madison, Wisconsin

Grace and peace to you
in the name of the Triune God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
the Mother of us all.

Throughout the middle of St. Luke's gospel, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem.

While this walk would only take a handful of days—maybe a week—Jesus isn't really in much of a hurry. Rather, Jesus is taking his time, walking with His band of disciples, engaging new, different, and even marginalized people, and regularly stopping to share meals with new friends. Despite His leisurely pace, sometimes it's the inquisitive locals—and not Jesus—who decide that He needs to stop and spend some time with them. They appear out of nowhere at the news that this famed prophet has been spotted in their hometown. They emerge from all sides, pressing up against Jesus and his disciples, an island of Galileans in the middle of a sea of townsfolk.

- They're stepping on one another's toes to get a better look at Him.
- They're elbowing their way in to hear Him.
- They're reaching their arms out to touch Him.
- They're whooping, hollering, and even booing as Jesus teaches, even egging Him on at times.
- They're enlightened and confused in equal measure by His parables.

And sometimes, brave folks even cry out a command or a question to Jesus, like:

Son of David, have mercy on me! *or*

What must I do to inherit eternal life? *Or even*

Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!

Despite Jesus' original intentions on his walk—teaching the disciples about the importance of testimony in His name and the virtues of the Christian life—He decides to engage this man's question. After all, He's not going anywhere anytime soon—not with this crowd of people pressing in around him. Presumably, this is an issue of some importance in the town—an ongoing dispute, with differing legal interpretations being offered by different local experts. The man solicits Jesus' opinion, however, because the words of the famous prophet would effectively seal the case.

Initially, Jesus is dismissive: **Friend, who set me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?** Maybe He won't weigh in on this pressing issue after all. Instead, He introduces a parable with this summary: **Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.** While we know in advance that this is the **moral** of the parable, it takes the whole parable to explain what life *does* consist of.

There's a rich man—but not any kind of rich man. He's a farmer, not a tax collector or an imperial henchman. This person is wealthy, but he isn't corrupt or distant from regular affairs. Rather, he probably had a few extra breaks in life (like inheriting a good portion of fertile land), worked hard, and was lucky enough to escape the worst

plagues and crop failures. For the hearers of this story, this was the kind of rich person they knew and probably worked for—someone they held in equal measures of respect and contempt. Bringing this parable into today’s world, this rich person is more like your boss at work than like a Fortune 500 CEO. Let's call her “the rich woman.”

It's been a record year—her sales commission is higher than ever before! With her new wealth, this rich woman's savings accounts are going to bump into a higher tier with a lower interest rate, be ineligible for FDIC insurance, and even cause a major tax hike. There's a lot—maybe even too much. Abundance can be a problem, after all. So this rich woman does what I suspect most of us would do: she finds a new bank and hires some sneaky accountants to find all the right tax loopholes. While she's still in the midst of all her planning, she already knows what she'll say to herself once she's done: **Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.**

It’s worth noting that her response is to soak in the abundance, even before it has arrived! She's longing for the vacation hiking in the mountains, the new electric car, and the good, wholesome meals accompanied by a nice glass of wine. In short, it’s the good life—and it's all in her head. She hasn't even deposited the check, been to the new bank, or signed the contract with those sneaky accountants. She’s simply planning for it, going a little bit overboard.

As she's in the midst of her planning, God speaks to her and says: **You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared,**

whose will they be? God wants to know—if your life ended today, who would get to enjoy all that you’ve stored away? This is a complicated question. Of course, we all hope that whatever legacy we leave—whether values or wealth—might benefit our loved ones. Yet God is asking a more personal question—will it matter to **you** that these people will get to benefit from it? Or, will you be bitter that you never got to see the fruits of your labor? That is to say, were your relationships strong enough while **you were alive** that you're pleased knowing that the accumulated wealth and its benefits will go to others, and not to yourself? If you can't easily answer yes, Jesus would suggest, your relationships are not strong enough, and the love of money has taken over your life.

Jesus' answer is one founded in the importance of relationship. Someone who has strong relationships with God, family, friends, and the larger community would be glad that their life's work might benefit those that they love. Their death—while untimely—was one part of a full life, where life and work were set in balance, and there was ample time for leisure and time spent with loved ones and in service to God and neighbor. Yet Jesus' answer also chastises us and our modern mode of work and relationship. You see, I think our society actively works against us—we have a hard time living into relationship.

Our American mentality is that life has three basic stages: **Development, Work,** and **Retirement.** The first two stages are narrowly focused on hard work that will lead to the next phase in life. During our development years, we focus on education—

identifying our skills and drawing on those skills deeply to prepare for our future work. Learning for its own sake is not considered purposeful. During our work years, we work as hard as we can. We hope that we're good at the work, and that we enjoy it. However, we often don't. But in this system, work does not need to be meaningful. The goal of our work is not to enjoy our productivity, but rather to amass as much as possible for the final stage: Retirement. In Retirement, our societal narrative says that we will finally have time to learn for learning's sake, work for work's sake, and have relationships for relationships' sake. Yet so often, we continue in our old ways—continuing to value ourselves by our output, rather than by our relationships. And who could blame us? We've spent the last 65-plus years in a different system—where everything we do brings us toward a future goal, rather than being the goal in itself.

As always, Jesus wants to set us free from this system, pointing us to a better way of life. He reminds us that our work of preparing for the future is only positive if we enjoy our work and have strong enough relationships to put the fruits of that work into action—not years down the road, but today. Jesus is suggesting that incessantly working to amass knowledge, power, or wealth weakens relationships—with others and with God. Jesus wants us to realize that the good life is not some future that requires a big 401k and Social Security. The good life is here, with us now. We received the good life when we were plunged into the waters of baptism, saved from the power of death. We taste the good life in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, when we are joined to God and

our fellow believers through the forgiving power of this sacrament. We share the good life with our friends over coffee and stories. We work within the good life when our labors are meaningful and fulfilling. We see it in the love between spouses. We marvel in it when we see a child explore the world. We harvest it at MCC's abundant garden. We speak it when we forgive those who have harmed us, and when we apologize to those we've harmed. We dish it out to a hungry person longing for a hot meal. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we have already been set free to see the good life, and to join in it—covetousness not included.