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Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 12: 13-21
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Priorities

There was an interesting story in the NY Times a couple of days ago about the Netherlands and Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder and one of the world's richest persons. Bezos commissioned a Netherlands-based shipbuilder to construct the world's largest sailing yacht, a 417 foot, three-masted, \$500 million schooner. The only catch, however, was that in order to sail the superyacht from the shipyard to sea, a historic unused railroad bridge would need to be dismantled. The shipbuilder asked the local authorities to briefly dismantle the bridge, which they would cover the costs for, a process that would take at most a day or two. In short, as the Times wrote, "the operation would have been fast, free and disrupted nothing." After initially agreeing to the project, the locals balked and denied the request. Why the fuss? A former Rotterdam City Councilor considered it a matter of values and principles, "What can you buy if you have unlimited cash? Can you bend every rule? Can you take apart monuments?"

It would be easy to frame the Parable of the Rich Fool in terms of the Jeff Bezos of the world. With a little creativity, it is fairly easy to justify our own possessions and wealth as reasonable, not excessive, and our rainy-day funds and retirement plans as prudent and wise. We know elsewhere in the Bible, we find counsel for hard work and wise future planning. Jesus himself spent time eating and drinking with people and enjoying life. The Parable of the Rich Fool, however, is about more than wealth: it is about priorities. In today's gospel passage, Luke is highlighting how the man asking about his inheritance, the rich man in the parable, and the

crowd Jesus is speaking to all have the wrong priorities. Three instances of mistaken priorities that each one of us can, and does, fall prey to.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” In first century Palestine, it was customary to seek out a rabbi to interpret Mosaic law and to settle disputes. In this case, though, notice what the man says: he makes his way through a crowd of thousands to demand Jesus rule in his favor. “Tell my brother!” he insists. He isn’t asking Jesus to mediate. He hasn’t invited his brother to plead his case before Jesus as well. He assumes he is in the right. Obviously, family strife and a broken relationship with his brother is at stake. But he doesn’t care. He only wants to finalize the dispute because his *priority* is receiving his inheritance, not reconciliation with his brother. He prioritizes wealth over relationship, greed over family, possessions over connection. He is so focused on receiving what he believes he is rightly owed that he has no regard for the irreparable harm such a forced demand will bring. Jesus refuses to be dragged down into the mire of the brother’s righteous selfishness and instead uses the situation as an opportunity to teach about the seduction of wealth. The man is a fool, just like the rich man in the parable, because the path he has chosen to claim his inherited wealth – even if it is justly owed him – will be at the expense of reconciliation and relationship. And, like the rich man in the parable, he has no guarantee as to how long the fruit of his misplaced priority will be enjoyed. We don’t have to have a family inheritance dispute to wrongly prioritize things over reconciliation and relationship. The seduction of wealth is easily replaced with the seduction of ego, or the seduction of jealousy, or the seduction of resentment or the seduction of bitterness over loving relationship. All mistaken priorities.

The second instance of mistaken priority is evident in the parable itself. The rich man seemingly has done nothing wrong. He had an unexpected windfall and made provisions to

preserve it. Is that so wrong? Why shouldn't he feel confident his future is "secure"? He is not foolish because he makes provision for the future; he is foolish because he believes by his wealth HE can secure his future. He is utterly self-focused. The key to understanding the rich man's wrong priorities lies in an examination of the language Jesus uses in the parable. "The LAND of the rich man produced abundantly," Jesus says. It is not the hard work and cleverness of the rich man that has yielded the harvest – it is the gift of the land itself. Confronted with the happy problem of a bumper crop, he consults with himself, with no thought of God or neighbor. The rich man has no confidantes, no one he trusts. He also has no sense of humility or gratitude; it doesn't occur to him to thank God for his superabundance. Everything he thinks after receiving the gift of the land is "I" or "my." "My crops," "my goods," "my grains," "my barns." Then he congratulates his own soul on his decision – an odd terminology for us, but one Jesus' listeners would have understood. "Soul" in Hebrew means the total person, not a segment of a person such as "mind, body and soul." The rich man equates the totality of everything he *has* to the totality of everything he *is*. His wealth defines him, it is the answer to all his problems, his road map to happiness. He prioritizes self over gratitude, control over humility, hoarding over generosity. It is God – the only time God is explicitly referenced in any of Jesus' parables – who corrects him. The man is a fool. It is impossible to achieve true security by amassing property; one becomes secure only by being rich toward God. Our lives, our possessions, are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely caretakers of them for the time God has given us on this earth. We say it every Sunday at the Eucharist, "All things come of Thee, O Lord." We may not be as completely self-focused as the rich fool, but how often do we truly ground our identity, our entire identity - all our achievements, degrees, accomplishments, money, and possessions - in the realization that everything we have is a gift from God?

The final instance of mistaken priority in today's gospel is our propensity to prioritize fear and worry over faith. Luke has placed the parable of the Rich Fool between two passages about anxiety and worry. Clearly, these are matters his followers are struggling with. "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?" Jesus tells the crowd just prior to the disgruntled brother's interruption. "Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. . . Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." Immediately after the parable, he tells his disciples, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. . . Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" In the parable, Jesus recognizes that what underlies excessive accumulation and selfishness is often apprehension and fear. It is our inclination to prioritize an attitude of scarcity – constantly imagining countless "what ifs" – instead of cultivating a mindset of abundance. When we live faithfully, trusting in God's mercy and goodness, we are released from the shackles of anxiety and the possession of our possessions. We prioritize living joyfully – however long our earthly life may be – with gladness for the abundance of everything.

Priorities. It is all about priorities. It is about who or what is truly the God of our lives. It is about how we invest our lives, and the gifts God has given us and how we enter into relationship with God and others. We have choices. We can choose to be rich with barns or rich with God. Amen.