

Storing Up Treasure

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on August 4, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: Psalm 107:1-9, 43 and Luke 12:13-21
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I can't help it. The more I thought about this morning's gospel reading, the more I thought about George Carlin. And [this](#) routine in particular, which he first performed at Comic Relief in 1986, is the one that came to mind.

The late comedian was known not only for his profanity, but also for his brilliant social satire. I think he's onto something, isn't he? And that was way back in 1986. This trend, of needing more space for more stuff, has only grown in the intervening thirty or more years.

Consider the following statistics:

In the last 100 years or so, home size in the United States has increased by 74%. As of 2016, the average new home in America has 2,430 square feet. At the same time, households have been getting smaller each decade. In 2015, the average number of people in a household was 2.58, a decrease from 4.54 people in each household in 1910. So that means that personal living space—the amount of space per person in a house—has increased by 211%¹

You would think that all that extra space would mean that our homes had plenty of room for all our possessions, but apparently not. While home size has been getting bigger, the personal storage industry has also been getting bigger. There are currently 1.7 billion square feet of rentable self-storage space in the US, which translates into 5.4 square feet per person, spread out over some 50,000 storage facilities across the nation. New construction of self-storage space reached 4 billion dollars in 2017.²

This puzzling juxtaposition may be explained in part by this: the steady increase in U.S. spending on stuff. As an example, over the last fifty years we have steadily purchased more and more durable goods, from one hundred billion dollars' worth in 1967 to 1.6 trillion dollars in 2017, an increase of 16 times.³

¹ Mark J. Perry "New US Homes Today Are 1,000 Square Feet Larger Than in 1973 and Living Space Per Person Has Nearly Doubled," *Carpe Diem*, The American Enterprise Institute, June 5, 2016. <http://www.aei.org/publication/new-us-homes-today-are-1000-square-feet-larger-than-in-1973-and-living-space-per-person-has-nearly-doubled/> Accessed July 31, 2019.

² Alexander Harris, "U.S. Self-Storage Industry Statistics," *The SpareFoot Storage Beat*, SpareFoot, March 11, 2019. <https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/news/1432-self-storage-industry-statistics/> Accessed August 1, 2019.

³ Adam Minter, "Somebody's Making Money Off of All Our Junk" Bloomberg, August 28, 2017. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2017-08-28/the-self-storage-business-is-booming-here-s-why> Accessed August 1, 2019.

Just when we think this is a particularly modern problem, we hear this parable from Jesus, and realize our modern problem might just be rooted in the very human problem of our tendency toward greed. Why *are* we so greedy? I've been pondering this a lot over the past week. Some people might argue that there is an evolutionary advantage in greed, which may explain why we seem to fall into it so easily.

Perhaps, our innate human nature bends us towards selfishness. "By nature, it is argued, we are in it for ourselves. Attempting to build an order where people's needs are prioritized over the interests of profit is doomed, because it goes against the grain of what it is to be human. Boris Johnson, the new Prime Minister of Great Britain and former mayor of London espouses this view. "Inequality fosters 'the spirit of envy,'" Johnson stated a few years ago, adding that greed is a 'valuable spur to economic activity.'" Americans hold this view a well. "An attack on capitalism is 'an attack on human nature' itself, according to [...] American humanities professor Mark Hunter. All of which is the perfect justification of the status quo: we cannot live under any other system because of our own biological hardwiring."⁴

But science says otherwise. Studies suggest that we are not by nature selfish creatures, and that "compassion is 'an innate human response embedded into the folds of our brains,' as [UC Berkeley] psychologist Dacher Keltner puts it. The reason we feel good when we help others has also possibly been discovered: compassion makes our bodies release more oxytocin into our bloodstream, the hormone that encourages bonding and friendship."⁵

"Toddlers have been repeatedly observed attempting to help struggling adults without being prompted. And selflessness and co-operation actually make evolutionary sense. [...] Biologists suggest that humans would have wiped themselves out if they were selfish above all else. As primitive hunter-gatherers we were [successful by being supremely] co-operative. [...] Modern hunter-gatherer tribes have been found to punish selfish behavior that violates an equitable order."⁶

All this is to say, I don't think God created us greedy. I think there's something else going on with our tendency toward greed, and, according Luke's gospel, Jesus has quite a bit to say about it. People who are rich and greedy don't fare well in this gospel. Right from the very beginning, Mary sets the pattern of criticism in her Magnificat. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," says Mary, "for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."⁷

Over and over, in both narrative and parable, the rich who refuse to share what they have with the poor are either sternly admonished or outright punished for their greed. And this is what happens to the rich man in today's parable.

⁴ Owen Jones, "Grotesque inequality is not a natural part of being human," *The Guardian*, Monday, November 24, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/grotesque-inequality-greed-human-nature-capitalism>. Accessed on July 31, 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Luke 1:46-48, 52-53 (NRSV)

At first glance, the man in the parable seems to be prudent. He's had an abundant harvest, and it makes sense to store the abundance for the future. Aren't we told that it's wise to have an emergency fund, to save what we can so that we'll survive the lean times? There's even biblical precedent for prudent savings.

In Chapter 41 of Genesis, Pharaoh has a dream of seven fat cows followed by seven skinny cows, and Joseph interprets the dream as a prediction that there will be seven years of abundant harvests followed by seven years of famine. He counsels Pharaoh to save all of the surplus from the good harvests so that the people will not starve during the famine. And this is exactly what happens.

But notice how the rich bigger-barn guy is different from Pharaoh; Pharaoh stored up grain not just for himself, but for the whole country. The rich man, on the other hand, is only thinking of himself. Listen how many times he uses the word "I": "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? [...] I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."⁸ He has no thought for anyone else—he doesn't even want to share his abundance with his family. Worst of all, he doesn't recognize that his harvest is a generous blessing from God, and neglects to give thanks for the gift.

Rather than having faith and trusting that God will continue to provide generously, the rich fool allows his anxiety and fear about the future to direct his behavior. Rather than operating from a place of compassion, and saving for the future not only for himself but his community as well, he turns toward greed. In the end, all that wealth has given him a false sense of security; his bigger barns cannot stave off his own mortality, and his abundant harvest goes to waste with his premature death. "So it is," Jesus says, "with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

As he often does, Jesus offers us a puzzling statement to ponder at the end of the parable. What does it mean to be "rich toward God"? How do we do that?

The answer can be found in the stories and parables he has already shared. Last month we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, a man of means who gives generously from his wealth to help a stranger in need. And we heard about Mary, who ignored the distractions of everyday life and busy-ness in order to pay attention to her relationship with God, through Jesus's teaching. Later in Luke's gospel we will hear about Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector, who will repent of his greed and give back what he has hoarded, and more.

The one thing that Jesus teaches about more than anything else is what it means to create and live in what the gospels call the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God or, as the gospel of Matthew puts it, the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus isn't talking about the afterlife, though many people interpret it that way. The word "kingdom" implies a particular place, and a hierarchy, the way earthly kingdoms are

⁸ Luke 12:17-19 (NRSV)

organized. But that's not what Jesus is talking about, either. Rachel Held Evans describes it this way:

The kingdom isn't some far-off place you go when you die; the kingdom is at hand—among us and beyond us, now and not-yet. [...] In contrast to every other kingdom that has been and ever will be, this kingdom belongs to the poor, Jesus said, and to the peacemakers, the merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for God. In this kingdom the people from the margins and the bottom rungs will be lifted up to places of honor, seated at the best spot at the table. This kingdom knows no geographic boundaries, no political parties, no single language or culture. It advances not through power and might, but through acts of love and joy and peace, missions of mercy and kindness and humility.⁹

There is nothing Jesus talked about more than the good news of this kingdom—or “kin-dom,” as Pastor Jeff and I like to say, as a way of emphasizing that this is a realm where all are family. This kin-dom is a place and time where everyone has enough, and no one has too much. This is why Jesus is so hard on the rich. The kin-dom of God will never be realized so long as there is vast income inequality. It will never be realized so long as so few have so much and so many have not enough. It will never be realized so long as we allow our anxiety and fear to drive us to be greedy.

In the passage that directly follows the parable of the rich fool, Jesus will tell those gathered around him to let go of the anxiety and fear that cause us to hoard our resources. It isn't part of the lectionary lesson assigned for today, but it really should be, because it helps us shift our perspective away from the bigger barns we want to build, and toward the kin-dom we should be building and the fullness of life that is rooted in wholehearted love of God and neighbor.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear,” Jesus tells us:

For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. [...] Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your [Creator] knows that you need them. Instead, strive for [God's] kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.¹⁰

I don't think Jesus is speaking to the poor here, but to those of us with enough to share. Telling a homeless person not to worry about what she will eat or wear is cruel. Instead, Jesus is reminding those of us with means to replace our fear with faith, to replace our anxiety with trust in God, and to replace our greed with generosity.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your [Creator's] good pleasure to give you the kingdom,” Jesus goes on to say. “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do

⁹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 252-254 (Kindle edition).

¹⁰ Luke 12:22-24, 29-31 (NRSV)

not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”¹¹ Amen.

¹¹ Luke 12:32-34 (NRSV)