

**Luke 12:13-21**  
**St. Andrew's, Nogales**

**Rev. M. Lucie Thomas**  
**1 August 2010**

Having recently returned from spending three weeks at my family's ranch in California, today's story from the Gospel of Luke hit right at home. Jesus is speaking to a large crowd when one person steps forward and asks him to become an arbitrator over a family inheritance. We could surely use some of the same kind of help as the nine of us cousins who have inherited undivided shares of the ranch have differing ideas about what to do with it.

Seven of us would like to keep the ranch, a beautiful little watershed in the California hills southeast of San Jose, intact and in agricultural production as an organic beef ranch, running fewer cows on the land. We wish the ranch proceeds to be plowed back into it for repair of fences and springs, other maintenance and some improvements to the buildings and corrals. We also wish to keep it as part of the green belt around the San Francisco Bay area. As owners we would not individually profit from this arrangement. Rather we wish to be good stewards of the land, which has been passed to us, and have it serve a wider purpose as part of the green belt. And we hope that the next generation will do the same. But of course we have control over that!

But greed has entered the picture. A couple of the cousins, it turns out, want money as their inheritance. One of them wants to be bought out at development land prices, not agricultural land prices, and seems willing to break the ranch up and even sell to outsiders, who might pay such prices. It's a difficult time, as you can imagine. My brother, who is the oldest son of the oldest son of the previous generation, is keeping the conversation going with all involved in hopes of finding a resolution to the situation without breaking up the ranch. Those of you who have inherited family property may well have experienced similar problems.

You see, it is divine providence we have to thank for the privilege of being able to be stewards of this beautiful little watershed, which is not of our own making.

In speaking to his questioner, Jesus warns him, and us, to be on our guard against all kinds of greed; for, he says, "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

To make his point Jesus tells the story of the rich fool, a man who has such abundance that his barns are full, and then comes into a bumper year crop. He could be commended for saving for future needs, and yet, he wants to store his entire current abundant crop, and to do that he needs to tear down his already full barns and build even bigger ones.

One might at first be inclined to compare him to Joseph, who as an overseer in Egypt, stored up huge amounts of grain because, due to a dream, he expected a famine. Joseph's plan was for the benefit of the many people who would be in need at such a time. No, the rich man Jesus was talking about was thinking only of himself and perhaps some good profits he could make selling his stored grain at higher prices in the future when the crops would be less plentiful.

In Jesus' time it was pretty clear that if the rich got richer, the poor got poorer as there was only so much arable land and limited water sources to tap into. Agriculture was pretty much a zero sum game. In fact farmers were expected to leave part of their crops in the fields to be gleaned by those who had no access to land to plant. In Hebrew tradition generosity toward others was a strong value.

The rich man was not thinking or acting as he was called to do by his religious tradition. God's call is to not only give glory to God, but to provide for the poor and marginalized people. The rich man has forgotten both the divine providence that produced the earth's bounty as well as his neighbors without access to that bounty.

And the rich fool, as he is better known, forgets that you can't take it with you, or as my mother always said, "Shrouds don't have pockets!" And that very night as he makes his barn expansion plans, God demands his life.

But, we might ask, isn't having an abundance of money and possessions a basic tenet of our modern American culture? How can we Americans understand this story and place ourselves in it?

Theologian Audrey West points out, "The nearly constant message of today's media is that life does, indeed, consist in the abundance of possessions. We are encouraged to spend more, have more, and use more; to supersize and maximize; to bank on the appearance of wealth as a sign of the good life. Insofar as the culture cultivates a propensity to buy things we do not need, it champions a way of life that this parable characterizes as folly."

Our forefathers in the faith throughout the centuries had much to say about greed. John Shelley reminds us, "Greed is not simply a craving for money, material goods, and honors; it is the inordinate desire for precisely those goods that the culture has determined bestow status and privilege on their owner. Greed is, therefore, idolatry, as the writer (of the letter to the Colossians) says, because greed deceives one into overvaluing the finite goods, thinking that this house, this car, or this promotion can satisfy the soul's deepest longings. Greed is yet more insidious, often disguising itself as prudent planning for the future, like the rich fool...Greed destroys community and spawns other vices: oppression, exploitation, and self-deception. As Jesus repeatedly warns his followers, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13).

We, and I include myself in this, need to be conscious that our wealth comes at the expense of others, those who work at wages too low to adequately support their families, the many who work in unsafe conditions here and in third world countries, at extremely low pay, often without health care or the ability to save for old age.

I think of my foster niece April, whom many of you have met. When I came to Arizona she was an addict living in deplorable conditions in the very worst parts of Tucson. With my support and encouragement, she decided to move out of Tucson, where her friends kept pulling her back into drugs. She got into rehab in Payson, and has been clean and sober, working as a baker, until recently when she and her partner, Alec, both lost their jobs in the same month. Jobs have dried up there as they have here, and she has not found another. Alec recently found a job, but before that happened he took up drinking, putting April at

risk, and she has succumbed again. She needs to go to a rehab program, but so far we have not found a subsidized or affordable program with space for her.

April wants to regain her sobriety and is scared about her future at this point.

And with the current recession, let's face it, we're all feeling an increasing uneasiness about the future.

Some of you here today are experiencing similar issues; others of you may have extended family members who are experiencing job loss, or facing huge medical expenses, or caught in a situation of domestic violence or addiction. These are stressful times.

And yet in the midst of all this we are called to be rich toward God. What does it mean to be "rich toward God"? Our story doesn't tell us, but the context in which it lies among other stories may give us some clues. We have the story of the Samaritan who used his resources to care for the man who had been beaten and robbed on the road and left for dead. Another story reminds us that being rich toward God means being attentive to Jesus' teachings, as Mary was, in the well known Martha and Mary story. Being rich towards God also means selling possessions and giving alms.

So let us ask ourselves these questions about what being rich towards God mean regarding our responsibility to family, friends, neighbors, fellow citizens and even people of other countries in this ever shrinking world.

What does being rich toward God mean in terms of our neighbors who may be in need?

What does being rich toward God mean regarding our responsibilities to our local community and organizations?

What does being rich toward God mean for how we participate in politics and vote? Remember we have a primary election coming up this month.

What does being rich toward God mean in the context of immigration reform?

What does being rich toward God mean for our nation's foreign policy choices?

Today's story of the rich fool may seem pretty bleak, but the letter to the Colossians gives us hope and tells us where that hope lies.

David Gray reminds us that the writer of the letter to the Colossians "writes with care for the early church, suggesting that we recognize the commonality among all believers. All who have experienced the grace of God have the Holy Spirit guiding them. We may not know exactly what the future looks like in our lives, but we know who holds the future."

As we come to the table this morning, let us remember that we have Jesus and God's Holy Spirit to guide us. And let us ponder the ways in which we can be rich toward God.

Amen.