

“Curve Balls and Barn Raisings”

Luke 12:13-21

August 1, 2010

You can learn a lot standing in line at the grocery store. You can read People magazine or Sports Illustrated and pick up all kinds of factoids and helpful tips for living. Or, you can just listen to the conversations going on around you – some are about the next swim meet, some are about Law and Order reruns, and sometimes you can even get a book recommendation. I was privy to a discussion about a book called “Trial and Heirs: Famous Fortune Fights.” What is the fighting about? Dead people’s money. Who is included? All kinds of dead people. I looked it up! Heath Ledger, Sonny Bono, Martin Luther King Jr., former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, baseball star Ted Williams, Princess Diana. We get the story of the fight over the estate of Jimi Hendrix, who died in 1970 at age 27 of a drug overdose intestate, meaning without a will. The book talked about how the father who didn't raise Jimi ended up with his money and passed it on to a half-sister who barely knew Jimi, giving very little to the brother with whom Jimi was very close. All of that attests to the dual nature of the human response to death.

First, death can inspire such kindness and compassion that it moves you to tears. It can bring out the very best in humanity when we let our guard down and reach out in ways that touch people’s lives in the midst of grief. But, as the book “Trial and Heirs” points out, death can also inspire the very worst in human behavior. That side of humanity we like to pretend does not exist in polite circles – the greedy or selfish side. This is not a 2010 problem – it’s been a problem since the beginning of time. In fact, Jesus himself spent a great deal of time addressing it – which is probably why some people did not like him too much. He did not get sucked into their craziness or their greed. And, he did not buy all of the rationalizations they were selling.

In our story, the hubbub starts up when Jesus is teaching a large crowd, and what happens whenever a large crowd gets together – particularly a religious large crowd? Somebody complains about something and wants the leader to take a side– that dynamic happened even with Jesus Christ at the helm. Someone in the crowd complains to Jesus about his cheapskate brother who has evidently cheated him out of his rightful share of an inheritance. *Come on, Jesus. Fix it. Take my side.* Jesus gently puts his arm around the guy and says, "Buddy, My mama did not raise a fool, and I'm not touching this mess with a ten foot pole. I'm not getting in between you and your brother. But think about this: be on your guard against all kinds of greed; your life is not about piling up possessions."

Jesus is so perceptive. He never gets fooled by curveballs we try to throw. Time after time in the Gospels - people come to Jesus presenting what seems to be one kind of problem, but it turns out to be something else entirely. At first glance, it appears to be a belt-high fastball. But, at the last second, that fastball develops a big hook and reveals itself for something else altogether. A curve ball. And although you and I and the Pittsburgh Pirates may find ourselves striking out with the high one – not so for Jesus. Jesus holds back until the baseball hangs, and then knocks it out of the park. Jesus is never fooled by our shenanigans.

Case in point, this guy tries to pitch his brother as the problem. If only his brother can get straightened out, he'll be a happy man! You know, I feel that way sometimes. Why, if only my handsome husband Joe would get his act together, I could be a really happy chick! If only that Church Board would go along with all my ideas, the world and all that is in it would know Jesus. If only I could get that car...if only I could win that lottery...if only I could get my kid to

move out of the house and get a job...if only other people would understand me...if only so and so would stop bothering me...if only...you fill in the blank.

Many of us lay our problems and our lack of joy and our lack of passion and motivation at the feet of other people and other things. Joe and I sometimes have one of those marital 'discussions' that goes like this. "Stop telling me what to do." "Well, if you'd do right, I wouldn't have to!" It's a common line of thought. If OTHER people would just do right, and 'right' by the way, is what I think they need to do. If other people would just do right, everything would be ok. But Jesus tells us it's wise to look closer to home. This man's problem is not his brother or what his brother did or did not do. This man's problem is himself.

His selfishness. His greed. His control issues. How sad it is when the money or the stuff we anticipate, or even the money or stuff we manage, become more important than our relationships. And there is nothing that will better test the values and character we profess to have than the choices we make between things, opinions, and people. So Jesus says: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And then Jesus illustrates his point with a parable – the one about the guy who builds bigger barns to store all his goods, and listen to what he says because you hear the same problem coming through with Barn Man as you did with the man who posed the question to Jesus in the first place. He says to himSELF: '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. I will say to **my** soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' What do you hear? Me, myself and I. And, what happens? "Me, myself and I" croaks, and the story ends with the key question, "Who does all this stuff belong to now?"

I don't think this man was mean. It's just that greed is sneaky. It is the master of disguise. Greed can disguise itself as self-sufficiency – I worked for this money. I worked for this position. I earned it. It is MINE to put in MY barns. Greed can also disguise itself as caution – I need to be prepared in case of emergency. I'd better not help the starving people wherever because, you know, my house and my barns might burn down one day. Greed can even disguise itself as stewardship – I need to hang on to protect what God has given me. God forbid I give anything to some undeserving soul. Those are exaggerations, but you get the point. When it comes to money, we need to be VERY careful and VERY honest when we examine our motives. Why DO we do what we do? Honestly.

So, we ponder that. We flip through our checkbooks – check # 531: God; Check # 532: me. Check # 533 God... he loves me, He loves me not! And we think we've got it. We have the message Jesus is trying to give us – he loves me, and let's be cheerful givers. But, wait, there's more! Just when we think we have it, there Jesus goes again with another dimension to this story! You see, it looked like a fastball, but it wasn't. Then it appeared to be a curve ball, but now Jesus is holding up his swing again and...look...it's a change-up!

Do you see it? At first the problem seemed to be the brother. Then it seemed the problem was the issue of greed. But now, at the very end of the story, Jesus brings us to even higher ground where he wants us to be: "So it is with those who store up possessions for themselves but are not rich toward God." Do you want to be a happy person? Do you want to find the secret to joy? Do you want to learn how to have good relationships, and experience life at its fullest?

Learn to be rich toward God. Well, duh, Jesus. Anybody knows that. Yet, I fear that when it comes to being rich toward God, we live in poverty. I'm a news junkie, and recently, I was browsing WRAL's news website, and there was all this coverage about the little four-year old girl who was tortured and died as a result right here in Johnston County. There were articles

about this oil spill and all of the beaches and wildlife and livelihoods that have been destroyed because of it. There was even an article about animal cruelty that was yet another picture of how little care we sometimes have for other life. All on one webpage. Maybe it was just a bad day, but I put my head in my hands, inundated with the violence and despair and the lack of basic compassion that passes for normal. It hit me this week that nothing in this world can fix that. Nothing in this world can make us rich enough to fix that. Money can buy a bed, but not a good night's sleep. Money can buy books, but not brains. Money can buy medicine but not health. Money can buy amusements but not class, not kindness, not beauty. Money can even buy companionship, but not friendship, not love, not compassion. Money cannot FIX what is wrong in the human race. But, it can make it worse.

It distracts us from what, or WHO, should get our attention and our time and our energy. It can make us think that as long as we have a little in our pockets and we're not living hand to mouth, we can take God or leave God.

Jesus' response is NO, you are wrong. Be rich toward God. How do we go about it? I'm no expert but two things come to mind if this is something you want to do – if building up your “God” portfolio is something you want to do. First, you do need a bigger barn. You need to raise a barn in your life to hold more God. That means prioritizing- setting aside time and space, laying the foundation with regular worship and prayer, and making an effort however you do it to spend time with God –just the two of you - so that your heart becomes a quiet place where he can dwell. Second, don't get too comfortable with just the two of you, because in Christianity, your barn raising is not just about you and God. You are a part of this body. And, I remembered this week just how amazing this body is – we celebrate. We grieve. We study. We work. We play. We eat really well. We've done all of that just in this past week – together. And, the Spirit of Christ showed up every time – it can't be scheduled. He might catch us as we close with prayer. He may break out in our laughter. But, even if we don't say it aloud, we know that Christ is here. That makes us rich. I want us to be rich.

I've been here a little over five years now, and that desire has not changed. I want us to be rich, so I hope we invest wisely. I hope we suit up and show up, because I am telling you, Jesus shows up here all the time with an inheritance that is greater than money. It's a whole kingdom. It has love. It has mercy. It has joy. It has laughter. It has brothers and sisters. It has fresh starts every day. That is where the treasure is. That's the promise. I believe it, because I've seen it. I also believe that if we, this body, pursue God at all costs, God will bless our efforts and we will be rich, so rich with the presence of God, so full of the presence of God that our building cannot hold him –before you know it, he'll be spilling over every barn we raise until the whole world shows up hoping for a share of our treasure. You can take that to the bank.