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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
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Colossians 3.1-11  
**Luke 12.13-21**

### **You Don't Have To Be Rich To Be A Fool**

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be.’”

—Luke 12.20

Quite a few years ago, my sister-in-law, Carol, was building a new house in Wyoming. Since she is a geologist, she decided to have special Wyoming granite tile in a small part of their entry hall. When she called the quarry to place her order, she was told that there would be a delay of six months because all supplies of that particular granite were being used to fill an order for Bill Gates, for the new home he was building. Briefly flattered to know that she had the same taste in granite as Bill Gates, she then learned where he was putting this fine granite: in his *driveway*! Apparently, his driveway was going to include fine stone from each of the 50 states. The architect for Bill Gates later contacted Carol and asked her if she would be willing to fly out to Seattle to consult—as a geologist—on the placement of the Wyoming granite. Whether 50 geologists were eventually enlisted, I don't know. Carol declined the offer. Thinking back about this, I can't help but wonder if Bill Gates has had second thoughts on his driveway. Since then, he's focused more on his foundation—which is good, but not nearly as entertaining.

Let's face it...we all love to have a laugh at the expense of wealthy people. Whether it is Martha Stewart getting shipped off to jail or the young bad girls getting busted for drunk driving, we get a kick out of their exploits. We like to see the rich get their comeuppance. And so, the Bible's “Parable of the Rich Fool” would seem to be a natural crowd-pleaser.

But it may not be what it first appears. I always thought of it as a story about a rich guy who builds bigger barns for his wealth and then gets called to meet his maker. And perhaps it

is. But it is also more. Fundamentally—at its heart—it is not a parable about riches. Jesus was not really interested in class warfare. Let's look closer.

First of all, the parable is told in response to a question:

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

Notice that Luke tells us nothing about the economic status of the person asking the question. It is just “someone in the crowd.” Someone, perhaps, not too different from you and me. Before Jesus tells the parable, he makes it clear that the lesson will have generalized applicability. The tale is not just for the rich, but for everyone. Jesus says: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Jesus goes on to tell a story. It is, indeed, a parable about “a rich man.” But that detail is given rather matter-of-factly. Jesus doesn't elaborate on the man's riches. He doesn't talk about his expensive clothes or his granite driveway or his many investments in real estate. Such details don't seem to matter for the story. He's just a guy who happens to be rich. For Jesus, the inquiry of the man in the crowd raised more than simply economic questions.

This is really a parable about isolation and the illusion of “complete independence.” The narrative focus of the parable is on the man's desire to be self-sufficient, secure, and happy. The first clue that something is amiss comes from the nature of the parable's dialogue:

And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘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.’

Who is taking part in this conversation? Only one person. The man in the parable is, quite literally, talking to himself!

The conversation is really quite perverse. Instead of calmly making plans, he moves from worry, to planning, to rejoicing at the prospect of complete financial independence.

Prudent planning is one thing, but the man in this parable crosses over the line between prudence and pride. He gives a classic example of what the ancient Greeks called *hubris*—unwarranted confidence in human ability. The height of his hubris comes in that last line: “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

Well, God can’t resist the opening. God observes this man talking to himself and decides to interrupt: “You fool!” He is a fool for two reasons. First of all, he has failed to appreciate the shortness and uncertainty of human life. He has wasted his limited time building bigger barns, no doubt at the expense of meaningful relationships with other people. Secondly, he has worked himself to the bone accumulating things that he cannot keep. ““You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?””

This is a parable for all of us. If we read it carefully, we begin to see how this parable about a *rich* man can be the answer to the question of an *ordinary* person: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” To Jesus, the *size* of the inheritance matters not. The focus on possessions over relationships—that’s the problem. The questioner and his brother should be sharing a time of grief and comfort; instead they are quibbling about money.

There is no easy solution to the problem raised by this parable. As human beings, we are all deeply susceptible to the temptations of greed and pride. Material possessions are not inherently bad, but we give them too much power in our lives. We become too attached, too fearful, too complacent. Whether rich or poor, we can all be fools. We can still forget that God may soon require things of us that have nothing to do with our “stuff.”

The Christian religion is no magic cure for the disease portrayed in this parable. But it can help. Take the sacrament of communion, for example. This holy meal anticipates the coming kingdom of God. It reminds us that we cannot guarantee our own future. The future belongs to God. When we come to the communion table, we are not self-sufficient. We must receive the bread and the cup from the hands of another person. The sacrament also guards against a hoarding mentality—a small amount is enough. It teaches us to be content with something simple and real.

The temptation to foolishness remains. The foolishness of Bill Gates is between God and Bill Gates, just as your foolishness is between God and you. A wealthy person's foolishness may cost millions while yours runs in the mere hundreds. Foolishness can be found at Target just as easily as it is found at Sack's. But in God's eyes, there is no difference.

Fortunately—for us—the same logic applies to salvation. Jesus is not especially judgmental of wealth, nor is he much impressed. At the foot of the cross, the ground is level.