

Cultivating Faith Sermon Series
Reaping the Harvest - Luke 12:13-21
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For this Lenten season, we've been on a journey to grow our faith, much like a farmer endeavors to grow crops. We've prepared the soil, we've chosen our seeds, we've taken care of the weeds, and we've tending the garden, learning from Jesus through his agricultural parables how we are called to live a life of faith that is fruitful and abundant. And now, on this Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem to give his life away from us, we learn what we are to do with the faith we've been working so hard to grow.

One of the things I really admire about Jesus is that he rarely avoided the tough questions. He constantly had these cunning religious leaders trying to trap him with their conniving questions, and he always found a way to outsmart them. No matter how duplicitous their scheme, Jesus answered in a way that trumped their trickery.

Pastors, on the other hand, aren't quite as willing as Jesus to face the tough questions. When talking to someone about our church, I'm always afraid that they're going to ask something that really puts me on the spot. "Pastor, my son wants to know if why God made homework so hard, if his pet lizard will go to Heaven, and if Jesus liked watermelon." Thankfully, I always have an answer. "See that door? That's Pastor's Trish's office...go ask her!"

On the other hand, Jesus had an answer for everything. Should we pay taxes to Caesar? Jesus had an answer. What is the greatest commandment? Jesus had an answer. Yet in our passage today, when this man lobs Jesus a softball question and asks him to help divide up the inheritance, Jesus says, "Who made me judge over you?"

Jesus sees this question not as an honest searching for a fair resolution, but as a request motivated by greed in a nasty turf squabble between two brothers. There are some parents whose legacy to their children is good character, strong values, and a love of the Lord. This parent only left his children a big pile of stuff and a legal case. And Jesus wanted no part of it.

Instead, he chastises the man for his greed, reminds him that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions," and tells the parable of the rich farmer. In this parable, here is a man who works hard, earns an honest living, doesn't cheat or hurt anyone, and gains an abundance. He then does the prudent thing, putting it all back to safeguard his future and well-being. Aren't we all doing that with our savings accounts, our stock portfolios, our IRAs and pension fund contributions? Aren't we all doing what we can to secure our future? Isn't that the right thing to do? And yet, God calls this man a fool. Why?

The man has a conversation with himself, then decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to hold all his stuff. You see, the more stuff we have, the more protective we become of it, the more focused we become on security. We are very protective of our freedoms, our country, our possessions. That's not a bad thing. It only becomes a bad thing when that sense of security overrides our calling as followers of Christ.

But wouldn't you know it? As soon as the man says he's going to take it easy, God throws a monkey into the wrench. While admiring his silos overflowing with corn and wheat and black-eyed peas, the rope on this man's hammock snapped, he tumbled down his manicured lawn, fell off his brick patio, landed in his in-ground pool and drowned. And Jesus drives home

the point by saying, "This is what happens when we put our security in our crops rather than in God." Hmm. We've been cultivating our faith all this time. I thought we were doing it for us.

It's interesting to note that Jesus also doesn't scold this man for having an abundance. He doesn't chastise him for being successful. I believe Jesus would support this man's desire to eat, drink and be merry. After all, Jesus didn't take a vow of poverty; he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, which means he had his share of food and drink. How can we ever become responsible stewards if we never have anything for which to be responsible? We don't say to a child, "Learn to read and then I'll give you a book" or "Learn to swim and then I'll put you in the water." We learn to be stewards by how we handle the stuff we have. We are blessed by God, and one of those blessings is our resources, like this man's crops.

So if this man doesn't do anything wrong to get his wealth, and it wasn't wrong for him to have it, what's the problem here? I believe his greatest error is in how he viewed what he had. Listen again as this man has a conversation with himself: "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "Self, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

His three favorite people are me, myself and I. My barns, my grain, my goods, my things. And yet what does Jesus say at the beginning of the parable? "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop." The rich man didn't have anything to do with it. He was given a gift by God: fertile soil, a favorable growing season, and a bumper harvest. Nothing we earn comes to us by our own efforts. The gifts and talents we use to bring in a salary and provide for our family and even grow our faith are from God. Everything we have originates from God. And God never intends us to keep it all for ourselves.

The farmer forgets that. Instead of seeing his abundance as God's to share, he sees it as his to keep. What do we do when we run out of room? We add on more room! George Carlin says a house is just a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff. And when we run out of room in our house, we rent storage units for the rest of our stuff. Those storage units are the modern day equivalent of building bigger barns. It would be ludicrous to say, "Wait a minute, I don't need all this. This is way too much." For the farmer, that abundant crop represented his future, his opportunity to have plenty of good things laid up for many years, so that he could take life easy, eat, drink and be merry. When you have more than you have room for, you simply have to make more room. This wasn't a frivolous decision on his part; this was an investment in his future. You have to be secure for the future.

The farmer's error is in thinking his security came from his crops, or his possessions, or his investments. Those things might provide the illusion of security and make us think we are protected from the capriciousness of life, but what he found out was that, ultimately, none of us are secure. A drunk driver, an aggressive tumor, a shift in the economy, a pandemic, and we find out the security we thought was built on a solid rock is actually built on shifting sands.

That's why our true joy comes not from cultivating our faith for ourselves, but doing so in order to live it out and share it with others. If we don't look beyond ourselves, it's easy to miss the joys, sorrows and needs in the world around us. And we have to work hard to move beyond ourselves, because I believe even the most altruistic, generous person is selfish by nature. That's in our DNA. It's the fight-or-flight principle. When it comes right down to it, we choose self-preservation. And in most cases, that's a very good thing. We take care of ourselves to make sure we have what we need. But where this becomes trouble is when we live selfishly even when we have more than we need.

The farmer didn't want to share what God had given him. He equates abundant life with abundant things. He was living out what I call practical atheism. He believed in God when it worked in his favor, and didn't pay attention to God when it kept him from enjoying the good life, when faith just got in the way of his plans. And he clearly had plans for his future – a life of leisure, recreation, freedom from the demands of work. That actually doesn't sound too bad, does it? It kinda sounds like the retirement I'm hoping for. But it's a mistake to believe that there's any security in what we've accumulated here on earth. There was a popular bumper sticker a few years ago that said, "He who dies with the most toys wins!" to which Jesus would say, "He who dies with the most toys still dies!" Our security is not found in what we have, but in who we are and in whom we put our faith. Yes, we need to plan for tomorrow, but we also need to have faith in God's goodness and promise of eternal life, regardless of what we have or don't have.

In the prudence of planning for tomorrow, Jesus warns us against sacrificing the joy of today. The life and faith we have been given as a gift is for living now, not for storing away until we retire or when the kids move out. We save and store up and hope that we'll finally come to a point in our lives when we'll find true meaning, beyond the responsibilities of a job and mortgage and raising kids. But our lives have meaning now, and that meaning comes from how we share the bounty of faith and blessings we have been given. In the end, God will not ask how big our barns were, but how we used the gifts were given to serve others.

That is what it means to be "rich toward God," to earn all we can and save all we can for the express purpose of giving all we can. Jesus doesn't encourage us to avoid a life of success, but to choose a life of significance, a life which is balanced and meaningful, a life where the dominant pronouns are "we" and "our," not "me" and "mine."

God comes to this farmer and tells him, "This very night your life is being demanded of you." Every day, our life is demanded of us. Every day, we are called to give our lives to the work of God's kingdom. It's so tempting to turn inward, to protect what we have, to buy into the illusion of security. Every day we make that choice. We can choose to build bigger barns, or we can choose to build the kingdom of God here on earth. The faith we are cultivating is not ours to hold, but ours to share. We can build bigger barns, or we can build the kingdom of God. What you are building?