

“The Place for Stuff”

“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

A few weeks ago, I was scrolling through the TV listings when I saw a program that was listed as “S. Wars.” Of course, I thought this was an episode of Star Wars, so I eagerly went to that channel – only to be surprised and disappointed that it was an abbreviation for a show called “Storage Wars,” in which people bid on the contents of storage lockers that have been abandoned or whose owners have failed to pay the rent. Sometimes the winner bidders hit upon a jackpot, but on other occasions the contents they have purchased have little or no value. The existence of such a program – and indeed the entire storage locker industry – is testimony to the fact that we live in a society in which we simply have too much stuff.

Anyone who has moved or has vowed to declutter their living spaces knows about this reality. Even though we are far from hoarders, Susan and I found ourselves tackling a mountain of stuff that we had accumulated in our last home, stuff that we had no intention of bringing with us to Stratford. We have been careful in what we have brought into our home here over the past five years, but there are times when I look around our townhouse and wonder why we have so much stuff and how it got into the house in the first place. These moments have often reminded me of George Carlin’s brilliant observations on a house simply being “a place for your stuff.”

- “You gotta have a place for your stuff! That’s all a house is – a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off on an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everyone’s got his own little pile of stuff... So now you got a household of stuff. And, even though you might like your house, you gotta move. Why? Too much stuff! And that means you gotta move all your stuff. Or maybe, put some of your stuff in storage. Storage! Imagine that. There’s a whole industry based on keeping an eye on other people’s stuff.”

The modern need to find more places for your stuff has an ancient precedent in Jesus’ parable in today’s Gospel lesson. The setting for this teaching is when a man in the crowd that has gathered around Jesus approaches him with a request that he serve as the judge in the division of an inheritance: *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”* (Luke 12:13). While there is a precedent for such a request in Moses’ serving as arbitrator in a dispute among the daughters of Zelophehad in the book of Numbers, Jesus rejects the role of judge or divider of inheritances: *“Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”* (12:14). Jesus rejects the man’s request because he will not participate in satisfying the greed that he senses had prompted it. Instead of helping the man to get the inheritance that he thinks he deserves, Jesus points the man to a different understanding of life, which is not measured in terms of wealth or possessions: *“Take care! Be on you guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”* (12:15).

Jesus senses that his occasion is an appropriate teaching moment, and so he begins his parable in which *“the land of a rich man produced abundantly.”* (12:16). There is nothing to indicate this man has done anything wrong, illegal, or immoral in his accumulation of this abundance; it is his actions in response to

this abundant harvest that will result in judgment. The Wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures is full of warnings about the prudent use of wealth, recognizing that such abundance is *“a blessing from God that demands both prudence and fidelity in making provisions for the whole community.”* (Alan Culpepper).

- *“Why should I fear in times of trouble, when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me, those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches?”* – Psalm 49:5-6.
- *“Good things and bad, life and death, poverty and wealth, come from the Lord. The Lord’s gift remains with the devout, and his favor brings lasting success. One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial, and the reward allotted to him is this: when he says, ‘I have found rest, and how I shall feast on my goods!’ he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies.”* – Sirach 11:14-19.

At first glance, the rich man’s response to his abundant harvest appears to be both wise and prudent. Rather than allowing the crops to rot in the fields, he decides to tear down his barns and build larger ones that can accommodate such a bumper crop, where he can *“store all my grain and my goods.”* (12:18). But there is a clue to the problem Jesus is addressing in this parable in the rich man’s exclusive use of the first-person pronoun: when he talks to himself in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is himself. His actions will be deemed foolish not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he thinks only of himself and lives only for himself:

- *“The rich man’s land has produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time.”* – Elisabeth Johnson.

The rich man looks upon his abundant possessions as the key to his security; now that he has *“ample goods laid up for many years”* he can sit back and *“relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry.”* (12:19). But he will soon learn the hard way what the writer of Ecclesiastes realized, that fruits of one’s labors will end up in someone else’s hands, because *“you can’t take it with you.”*

- *“I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I have toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.”* – Ecclesiastes 2:18-19.

This moment of reckoning comes far sooner than the man could have imagined, for the parable ends with God addressing him directly: *“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”* (12:20). God addressing the man as a “fool” evokes a reference from Psalm 14:1: *“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.”* While the rich man may claim to believe in God, his actions in dealing with his possessions and planning for the future show that he lives as a “practical atheist,” making decisions as if God did not exist. He is a fool because he has made a god out of his possessions, placing all his trust in confidence in things that cannot and will not provide him with what only God can offer.

- “He is a fool, says the parable. He lives completely for himself, he talks to himself, he plans for himself, he congratulates himself. His sudden death proves him to have lived as a fool. ‘For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?’ (Luke 9:25).”
– Fred Craddock.

Jesus concludes his teaching with a warning to his listeners: *“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”* (12:21). No amount of wealth can secure our lives with God – in fact, wealth can get in the way of our relationship with God. Jesus is not condemning possessions *per se*, nor is he warning against planning for our future needs and those of our families. Jesus isn’t even teaching that his followers shouldn’t enjoy what God has given them; we know from the Gospels that Jesus spent time eating and drinking with people and enjoying life. The issue here isn’t wealth or possessions; it’s our relationship to these things, and whether we place our trust in the true God, or the false god of our “stuff.”

- “When the rich man gets the bad news, it dawns upon us that we may be the fools, carrying, covering, locking up our stuff, staving off death. Perhaps this practice of acquiring and consuming, building and storing, only increases the idiocy and intensifies the fear ... Maybe it’s not about ‘trying to find a place for you stuff.’ Maybe it’s not about your abundance of possessions. There could be an alternative – just walking around all the time, winging as the ravens, blooming as the lilies, rich toward God.” – Cynthia Briggs Kittredge.

The rich man is remembered as a fool not only because he has placed his trust in things that ultimate will fail to deliver what he expects from them, but because he fails to recognize that he never really owned anything that was in his possession. Jesus’ parable is a teaching on stewardship, the fundamental understanding that *“all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above”* and that our role is to be faithful caretakers of what God has entrusted to us. In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that when we confess that *“I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,”* we are confessing our faith that God is the one who provides all our needs, and that our role is to live as faithful stewards in recognition that *“no gifts have we to offer for all your love imparts, but what you most desireth – our humble, thankful hearts.”*

- “God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all of this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”

Our possessions are gifts from God, but our possessions are not our God. When we confuse the two – when we place our trust and confidence in the things that God gives to us rather than in God, then we have made a foolish choice. The issue is about who is truly God in our lives and how we invest our lives and the gifts that God has given us: *“It’s about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our neighbor, toward God’s mission to bless and redeem the world.”* (Johnson).

The final scenes of the movie *Citizen Kane* are set in Xanadu, Charles Foster Kane’s luxurious mansion that is filled with a vast array of priceless treasures. But rather than being a celebration of one who has lived a “lifestyle of the rich and famous,” it is a scene that confirms that tragedy that is Kane’s life, one in

which he endeavored to recapture what had been taken from him as a child through the accumulation of power and possessions, which in the end turned out to be false idols. Charles Foster Kane stored up treasures for himself, but in the end it too was *“vanity, and a striving after nothing.”*

While we may continue to struggle to find “a place for our stuff,” it is important for us to understand the proper place for stuff in our lives. All that we possess – our homes, our clothing, our food, all of the necessities of life – are gifts from God, a reminder that *“all that we are and all that we have belongs to God [and therefore] our future is secured beyond measure.”* (Johnson). The place for stuff must never take the place for God in our lives, for *“those who confess Jesus look to God for their security, not to their own ability to accumulate possessions and lay up wealth for the future.”* (Culpepper). There is a place for stuff in the lives of Christians – to use what God has entrusted to us so that Jesus’ purpose might be fulfilled: *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10). Amen.