

Sunday, July 31, 2022

Sermon: A Rich Farmer and Greed

In Luke 12, the all-American story faces its demise. If ever a Bible story reads like the All-American story. If there was ever a character in the New Testament that seems like "our guy," the rich farmer is our guy. Hard-working, successful, rich, ambitious, and he has a vision. He could probably convince the *Shark Tank* investors to put a pile of money in his expansion project. There's only one problem: the ending of the story doesn't work for us. This is not how we expect rich people to be treated.

This is not how we expect farmers to be treated. I have been a pastor in a farming community – soybeans, corn, and rice. Hard-working, salt-of-the-earth people. One farmer had 2500 acres and he never came to church unless he had a fight with his wife. If she was really mad at him, he would show up at church for 3 Sundays in a row, and when life at home smoothed out, he would be missing from church for months at a time. This went on year after year, like clockwork. He once told me, "The church house is my doghouse."

The American story doesn't include rich farmers facing the judgment of God. Maybe I should ask some of the Christians who seem to know exactly who is going to hell in America. There's a group of folks who tell us they have it all figured out. They have a list of the people who are hell-bound: feminists, gays, environmentalists, abortionists, socialists, liberals. The other side has a list – racists, right-wingers, white supremacists, hate groups, and the like. But our rich farmer doesn't fit in any of our categories. I think that really frustrates people. In our culture, you have to pick a side. You can't be in the middle. So, when we can't make someone fit in one of our label boxes, we don't trust them. This farmer is neither a conservative nor a liberal. Maybe the part about him being rich and hard-working and productive suggests that he is a conservative, but that's too stereotypical.

Maybe the part about him that eats, drinks, and makes merry means he is a liberal, but I have done some partying with conservatives.

Maybe he's like a man in one of Fred Craddock's sermons – a man named Frank. Frank was 77 years old. He was a good man, a strong man, a pioneer, a rancher, and a farmer. He was rich. There was a café in town that had the best attendance as a group of other farmers and ranchers met there every morning to talk about the weather, the crops, the commodities market, while their wives and children were in church. Frank was the patron saint of the group. He never went to church. These were good men, hardworking men, family men. All the other men looked up to Frank. Rev. Craddock said he met Frank on the street one day and shook hands and talked a bit. He didn't accost him about Jesus, but Frank blurted out, "I work hard, and I take care of my family and I mind my own business." That was Frank's creed. I wonder sometimes what the creed is of folks who never attend church. Maybe the rich farmer saw no need for God.

Maybe, but it sounds more serious. After all, our all-American hero is called a fool. Can you imagine anyone calling the CEO of Berkshire Hathaway a fool, or the CEO of Goldman Sachs? Well, Lloyd Blankfein did say that Goldman Sachs was doing "God's work." I wouldn't say that makes him a fool, but I roll my eyes at his comment. Forbes puts out an annual list of the richest people in the world. It is not called the "Fool's List." If anything, it reads like the list of the greatest idols in our culture. People we adore, worship, emulate, and want to be. I am convinced that poor people support the 1% because they want to be in the 1%. They don't want to be stuck in Folsom prison when that train with the "rich folks eating in a fancy dining car, drinkin' coffee and smoking big cigars keeps a rollin' down to San Antone." If we aren't rich, we probably want to be rich. This story doesn't make American sense.

As for the rich farmer, Jesus says he is telling a story about greed. It's right there in the text. Greed not hell is the subject. The farmer has a reckoning with God. Everyone does at some point.

Let's consider that this may be the right story for us to be reading because of our current economic difficulties. Theologically, some people would say that our chickens are coming home to roost because our greed has grown out of control. I don't think it is clear how greed is connected to our economic troubles. I have friends convinced that we are suffering because some became too greedy. We continue to be troubled, they tell me, because the rich are getting very, very, very rich and the poor are getting very, very, very poorer. In this reading, greed has no limits or shame. Greed has to increase because it is the necessary engine for economic growth, and we believe that the economy has to always be growing. We once had millionaires, now we have billionaires. Who will be the first trillionaire? How rich do we need to be to have enough? I'm not sure.

Some people tell me athletes are greedy, but not the billionaires who own the teams. The desire for money may be an indication of greed, but I believe greed is a much more subtle vice than simply the desire to get rich. If that is the definition of greed, then we are all a bunch greedy, uh, persons.

Here's the difficulty I'm having. We live in a culture that celebrates and desires wealth. I am a preacher of the gospel of Jesus, who teaches us that we are gripped by greed. Mixed messages? Of course.

Here is where the rich farmer can help us. The one characteristic associated with greed is the presumption that no matter how much we have we need "more." We need more because we cannot be sure that what we have is secure. So, the more we have the more we must have. The rich farmer is a living caricature of the "more" syndrome: 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. He's fixated on "I" – a raging individualism and he has what one preacher dubbed "more-itis."

In America, we don't recognize this as greed. We call it a vision, a game plan, a business strategy, good sense. I am suggesting that we have lost the ability to see how greed possesses our lives. Our parents told us to work hard, to get ahead, to be the best we could be. Greed has insinuated itself into all these positive lessons and we don't even realize it. How subtle!

Now, look at the story once more. Do you identify with the rich farmer? Are you at all uneasy about the judgment that this man, in God's sight, has been foolish, and that now he must face the consequences of his greed? After all, as we have seen, his greed is invisible to us. I am not suggesting to you that this man went to hell for being rich. The story doesn't address the subject. I am saying that something is not exactly right in this man's life. His All-American desire, expressed in the All-American slogan, "Eat, drink, and be merry," turned out to be insufficient for a flourishing and meaningful life.

Sometimes we need to read an Old Testament story to get at the meaning of a New Testament story. So, let's go back to the story of Pharaoh in the Old Testament book of Exodus. The story of the rich farmer parallels the story of Pharaoh. The Old Testament story is not subtle, and it shows the greed of Pharaoh in living color. Pharaoh had a surplus of food. In fact, he controlled the food supply of the ancient world. Pharaoh is a metaphor. He shows us what raw, earthly power looks like. He is a stand-in for all the greedy, powerful people who take what they want and in doing so create damage for all others and place all others in situations of precarity. Pharaoh has a food monopoly, and he uses it as a weapon. Pharaoh shows us greed before we baptized it,

made it a virtue, and turned it into a necessity for economic growth.

And Pharaoh has a man of God on his side. His name is Joseph. The story tells us that Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. There was a severe famine and Joseph bought all the land at a cheap price. Because Pharaoh has so much land, and produces so much food, he needs granaries where he can store his surplus. Now remember the words of our rich farmer: And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'" Sounds like Pharaoh.

Now, please look at what Pharaoh does. He used forced labor, made slaves of all the people, including the Jews, and put taskmasters over them, and they were forced to build supply cities to store the food. The store-house cities are an ancient parallel to the great banks and insurance companies where surplus wealth is kept among us. Now again remember our rich farmer: He built bigger barns. He acts like Pharaoh.

Pharaoh, not content to have all the food supply, not content to have all the land, not content to enslave all the people, decides that he will cut his costs by taking away the supplies that his cheap labor had to use to make bricks. "You shall no longer give straw to the people to make bricks as before. They still must meet their daily quota of bricks, but they also have to gather their own straw. Pharaoh then accused his slaves of being lazy. "You are lazy and that's why you pretend that you want to go and sacrifice to your God." Pharaoh is the definition of greed. He is greed revealed.

The rich farmer is subtle greed, invisible greed, all-American greed. I don't know if we are like the rich farmer or not. All I know is that I would have loved to have baptized the rich farmer. I would have loved for him to realize that his life didn't consist of the abundance of his goods or the size of his barns. I would love to have shown him that his business was to serve human need. I

would have the baptistery filled on a summer Sunday morning, led the rich farmer into the water, raised my hand, and said, "Upon your confession of faith in Jesus Christ and in obedience to his command, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Amen.