

"True Wealth"
Luke 12:13-21

July 31, 2016

11th Sunday After Pentecost

There is always a buzz across the land when the winning prize in the lottery goes over \$100 million. (Apparently \$50 million is not enough to excite people.) There will be stories in newspapers; features on television news shows; and conversations in taverns, convenience stores, and church fellowship halls (I suppose) about the big lottery prize. The buzz and the stories and the conversations usually go like this: "So, what would you do if you won the lottery?" It always makes for interesting stories, interviews, and conversations.

How would you answer the question? Now, maybe you don't buy lottery tickets, but you got the money in some other way. What would you do if you became truly wealthy? Some would buy a big ticket item – a camper, boat, cabin, or a new house. Some would buy the latest electronic gizmos – a new iPhone, iPad, iPod, or computer. Some would buy new toys: drones, golf clubs, golf carts, and country club memberships; fishing equipment; hunting equipment; and so on. Some would buy luxurious vacation trips to places Mexico City or other exciting destinations. People will talk about all sorts of things they can buy and enjoy for themselves.

Do you know what I rarely (if ever) hear people say when they suddenly become wealthy? "Oh, good, now I can increase my giving to the Lord through my church." Or, "Great! Now I can help feed starving children throughout the world." Sometimes people will say stuff like that to me when they realize they are talking to a pastor and *should* say something like that. But usually spending wealth on others is not a choice that is high on many people's lists and is completely missing from some people's lists. The thinking seems to be: if I get wealthy, then it means more stuff for me.

Now we may be shocked at this but we really shouldn't be. It is the essence of our nature as sinful human beings that we think this way – satisfying our own desires while, at the same time, ignoring the needs of others. Sin originated when Adam and Eve wanted to satisfy their own desires while ignoring the Commandment of God. It's still the same today. Sin drives us to satisfy ourselves while ignoring both God and neighbor.

Sin also causes us to misunderstand the nature of wealth itself. First, we think possessions are what life is all about. The person who has lots of possessions has a full and happy life. On the other hand, the person with few possessions has a deficient and sad life. This leads to competition among people to "keep up with the Jones" which is spurred on by our consumer driven society which tells us what we just have to have in order to lead a fulfilled life.

Secondly, we think that possessions are earned by our hard work or deserved by us because we are good people. The purposes of possessions are to meet our needs and to satisfy our desires. Therefore, we are free to use possessions in any way we see fit. No one can tell us differently. It's our stuff. We worked long and hard for it. We'll decide how to use it.

Jesus deals with the issue of possessions in our text for today. Someone in the crowd seeks Jesus' help as an arbitrator in a rather messy inheritance case. Jesus refuses to get involved in this dispute over possessions. He then turns to the crowd and says, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness [i.e. "greed"], for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

In other words, there's more to life than our bank balance and possessions. Possessions are morally neutral but they can become dangerous to our spiritual lives. Our love for, pursuit of, and devotion to wealth can turn them into idols which can threaten our relationship with God and our eternal life. St. Paul writes, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

And for what? Things that are part of this fallen world which have been corrupted by sin like us. Everything which we try so hard to obtain, possess, and maintain will some day be completely consumed, outgrown, worn out, or destroyed. And then where will your life be?

That's not all. Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who became richer and didn't know what to do with all of his wealth. Apparently, the thought of sharing with those who were in need never crossed this guy's mind. All he could think of was to tear down his overflowing barns, build newer and bigger barns, and then eat, drink, and be merry. "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the

things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." So, not only will your possessions not be around one day, but YOU won't be around one day. What will happen to your precious possessions then?

God calls the rich man a fool for devoting himself to earthly wealth and possessions. Jesus says everyone who has the same attitude as that of the rich man and copies his devotion to possessions is a fool. Are you a fool? If so, how do you change? According to Jesus' final words in the text, the problem is not wealth itself, but what kind of wealth. The fool is the one who lays up treasure for himself. The wise person is the one who is rich toward God. What does that mean?

God gives us the greatest wealth in the world: His grace and mercy through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Word of God says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9) The Son of God became poor, leaving the majesty and glory of His heavenly throne to take on human flesh, the human flesh of a servant, and be born in a cattle trough.

His poverty took Him to a cross where He took on Himself our sins and endured the punishment, the death, and the hell that we, by our sin have deserved. He rose from death to life so that He might share His victory over sin, Satan, death, and hell with us. By His poverty, we who were spiritually bankrupt with no hope for the future and no comfort in death have become rich beyond our wildest dreams. We have a wealth which never runs out and which obtains possessions for us which we truly need and will truly bless us.

God's grace – His undeserved love for you – is always available to you, no matter how often and how badly you sin and screw things up. He is always willing, able, and present to save you from yourself and your sin. God's mercy – His love in action – is always available to you, no matter how great the need is or how fantastic the desire is.

God's grace gives great wealth to us. We have full and complete forgiveness for all of our sins – deliberate sins, unintentional sins, known sins, unknown sins, sins of thought, word, and deed. All are forgiven for Jesus' sake. As a result, no matter how turbulent our world gets to be, we are always at peace with God.

God's mercy gives great wealth to us as well. We have a great many physical blessings from God to support this body and life and even many luxuries to make this life enjoyable. Therefore, we never need to worry or be afraid. As Jesus says just after our text about greed, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on... For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you." (Luke 12:22,30-31)

The greatest wealth we have is His Kingdom. By virtue of our baptism, we have new life in His Kingdom now. By virtue of Jesus' resurrection, that life cannot be threatened or stilled by death. We shall live forever in the perfect and holy life God always intended for us to have. We have no reason to fear death or be unsure about what will come.

We are now free from having to lay up treasures for ourselves here in this life. The things of this life do not have to have a grip on us. We have a greater wealth in Jesus Christ. That means we are free to be rich toward God. "To be rich toward God is to believe that God is the giver of all things, including life and salvation. To show that one believes is to share with others the gifts God gives." (Just, p.507) We are free to let go of the wealth of this world to help our neighbors (even our enemies) who are in need as we hold on to the greater wealth we have in Jesus Christ.

This is, of course, easier to say than to do. Sometimes your spirit will feel impoverished as you struggle in the battle of earthly wealth vs. spiritual wealth. That's when it's time to come to the house of the Lord. Let Him fill you with great wealth as you hear the Absolution, listen to His Word, and receive His Supper. You will be renewed and strengthened and wealthy once again.

So, what *would* you do if you became wealthy? That's not a hypothetical question for us any more. We are wealthy in Christ. We have His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness. Hold on to that wealth freely given to you by God through Christ. Never let it be replaced in your heart or your priorities by mere earthly wealth. Freely share that wealth freely given to you by God through Christ that others may know the joy, the peace, and the hope that is in the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is true wealth and we are all very wealthy people. Amen.