

Luke 12 13.21 Big Barns and Tiny Houses

I am a big fan of the HGTV network. What time I spend watching TV can probably be divided equally between sporting events and shows on the HGTV or DIY networks. There are a few other channels I visit, but most of the shows I watch are on ESPN or a similar network and HGTV. I enjoy Fixer Upper and Flip or Flop, but recently I have noticed one titled Tiny Houses, Big Living. In these shows are depicted a wide variety of people who are seeking smaller places in which to live, ways to either unclutter their lives or make their living spaces less expensive by living in 300 sq. ft or so. The reasons given are many, but the overall image is that it is not necessary to have a big space in which to live in order to live well. Of course although the overall space is small, most of them seemed designed to incorporate all the conveniences of modern living—just in fewer square feet. It seems the attitude of George Carlin as expressed in a 1986 comedy routine has gained some traction in this movement to living in smaller spaces. He said: “That’s what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff. Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.” Our gospel from Luke this morning got me and a few others thinking about the subject of our “big barns”—the places we live to keep an ever growing number of possessions. The passage begins, like many of the stories or parables Jesus tells with a question from the crowd which has gathered around Jesus. This particular question is raised by someone in the crowd who is not identified—we don’t know if it is a young person or even whether it is a male or female follower. We probably can assume that it is a man because inheritance in that culture would not have been something a woman expected to receive and this is a request to intervene in an inheritance issue with a brother. We might tend to think that this is a young man—impatient to get what is coming to him, but we don’t know that either. All we are told is that someone in the crowd wants Jesus to intercede in a family matter—a matter of inheritance. We find that Jesus quickly refuses to enter into the sibling’s dispute over things, but instead shifts the focus to a warning: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” That is a message which I think we all need to consider because our culture surrounds us with images, slogans, and an unceasing barrage about material possessions and our need for them in order to be happy. My grandson Henry is probably not unique when there is something he wants that he expresses this desire as something he needs. Our reality is that no matter how much we have, we are always aware of things we don’t have due to the marketing wizards whose job it is to convince us of all the products out there we need to complete our lives. And so we never quite feel that we have enough. We’ve bought into a version of the prosperity gospel when we imagine this is God’s design for our lives. As we examine this parable, we see that Jesus isn’t warning against money, wealth, or material abundance in and of itself. Instead, the warning is about greed, about the insatiable feeling of never having enough and what that does to our relationships. Remember this story began as an issue between brothers over an inheritance. In telling this story, Jesus makes clear that life is not about stuff, about money, possessions, and collections—but rather it is about God and relationships. The parable Jesus tells begins with the information that the land of a rich man produced abundantly. The man is not portrayed as wicked. He has not gained his wealth illegally or by taking advantage of others. The issue is not with the wealth itself. The key perhaps lies in the statement that the land produced

abundantly, or in other words, God has given the man an unexpectedly abundant harvest. It is crucial to understanding the parable to see what happens next. In verse 17 we find “and he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store **my** crops?’” When this man sees that his land has produced abundantly, he begins an internal debate. This verse begins a series of thoughts where the first person dominates all the considerations. The word “I” is used seven times as the man considers what to do. “I will do this: I will pull down **my** barns and build bigger 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.’” Notice that the conversation is not only to himself, but it is also **totally about himself...and only himself.** There is no evidence that there is anyone else in his life, anyone else he should care about, anyone else who might have contributed to or benefit from this bountiful harvest. Instead, when confronted with the blessing of an abundant harvest, all he can think of is what he should do to make sure he gets the most out of it so that he can live comfortably into the future. This goal of the rich man’s life fits well into our culture and its “wisdom” which encourages amassing, collecting and hoarding in response to a scarcity model of existence. The rich man’s plans are to secure his future—it seems that he believes that he can secure his own future on his own. That he needs no one, depends on no one, and can go it alone. Since the man already had barns which were evidently sufficient to store a normal harvest, since he was already a rich man, the issue was what he would do with the abundance. He expresses no gratitude to God for the bumper crop or to the workers who helped harvest it. He has given no thought to sharing it with others. His consultation with himself concludes the answer to the situation is to build an even bigger barn for his crop and his other goods. He plans a self-congratulation celebration with himself as he contemplates this future he has designed. This is why God calls him foolish. Verse 20: “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?’” It seems that all he has is his stored up possessions, and no one in his life. The rich man learns the hard way what the writer of Ecclesiastes realized as stated in the verses in our preparation for worship—the truism of the old saying that you can’t take it with you. All that we work for so hard in life will end up in someone else’s hands. No amount of wealth can ensure or protect us from everything bad. No amount of wealth can keep our relationships healthy and our families from falling apart. In fact, wealth and property can easily drive a wedge between family members. It was the instance of the brothers’ disagreements and fighting over inheritance which served as the impetus for this story by Jesus. Recognizing that what should have been an occasion for celebration, remembrance, and gratitude—the giving and the sharing of an inheritance—has instead been turned into a moment of division, Jesus has told a story of a man so enraptured with his good fortune that he ends up all alone. The goal of the abundant life Jesus describes is interdependence rather than independence and self-reliance. It’s not that God doesn’t want us to save for retirement or future needs. It is not that God doesn’t want us to “eat, drink, and be merry” and enjoy what God has given us. We know from the gospels that Jesus spent time eating and drinking with people and enjoying friendships and life. But he was also clear about where his true security lay. It is all about priorities. It is about who is truly God in our lives. It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts God has given us. It is about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our neighbor; toward self gratification or toward God’s mission to bless and redeem the world.

After all, we affirm that our lives and our possessions are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. Still we rebel against this truth because we want to be in charge of our lives and our stuff. We tend to forget that things are transitory. This is where we need to think about how we might be like the rich man in the parable. In our desire to possess things, we can become possessed by them. When this happens we are being foolish also. And that is how Jesus concludes this parable, that this is the way it always is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. The two notions—storing up treasure and being rich are verbal forms with the same roots as the noun treasure and the adjective rich. In other words, it isn't a question of something we happen to have or a characteristic among many. We actively choose to do one thing or the other, to be rich with barns or rich with God, to serve God or mammon. Often what underlies excessive accumulation is anxiety and fear. Yet we affirm that we belong to God. And that is the good news. Because all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, our future is secure beyond all measure. Jesus' advice is to store up treasure—riches toward God. We are to turn toward the kingdom and the fullness of life which is rooted in the wholehearted love of God and neighbor. God does not call this man a fool because he saved, but because he thought only of himself in the depths of his soul. To be able to eat, drink, and be merry as the man envisions, we don't need big barns full of stuff—we need people—people to hear the story of our lives and see us as beautiful souls; we need people to share our story and advocate for us, vouch for us, give support to us when we can't stand alone. We need to give praise to those around us. We need to build up people instead of building bigger barns. We need to understand we will sleep better at night not with more possessions, but when we give thanks that we are not going to bed hungry, or without a roof over our heads. The elements of an abundant life described by Jesus throughout the gospels—things like relationship, community, love, purpose—may be less tangible and harder to count than possessions—but they are also more powerful than material goods. These kingdom things are readily available to us—we just need to take notice. We don't need big barns full of stuff, the things that matter can be found in the tiniest of houses. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.