

## Enough Stuff

Just what is enough stuff? About a year ago I began thinking about planning for the future and the coming need for me to move from my home into a smaller space without the surrounding yard and grounds which require maintenance. Because I was an only child, I moved much of my mother's possession into my home, which included much of her sister's and her mother's possessions...and of course there is the accumulation of my own life...you get the picture...my home has a lot of stuff in it. A lot of stuff with memories attached, probably not much that would be considered valuable but still...a lot of stuff. About the same time, I noticed that Harrisburg has become the site several new large buildings—not one or two—but at least four—very big—storage buildings that people rent space in to keep “stuff” for which they have no room where they live. There is also a housing boom in Harrisburg and the houses being build are two and three story buildings that look to be very large. All this reminds me of a comedy routine by George Carlin which aired in 1986. It was a commentary on the behavior of people and their tendency to acquire possessions which contained these lines: “A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it.” “And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. That's what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff. Sometime you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.” Carlin's routine isn't quite the parable told in Luke gospel, but the subject does sound somewhat similar to the situation of the foolish man Jesus described. There is another phenomenon demonstrated by something seen happening lately on two types of television shows. One is a reality show where people are called to de-clutter their homes item by item: taking the item, thanking it for its use, and then “letting go of it” by giving it away. The other is an HGTV program called “Tiny Houses” where people seeking to un-clutter their lives reduce the size of their living spaces to 300 square feet or so. The reasons given for this change 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 space they move into is indeed small, most of the spaces seem designed to incorporate all the convenience of modern living—just in fewer square feet. They still have the “stuff” deemed necessary for their convenience. As Jill Duffield point out in her commentary on the lectionary passages this week, all of the texts are directional; they point us in one direction, a direction toward a relationship with God. In the passage from Hosea, which was not read, we have God's lament. Chapter 11: 2-God says “ the more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” The instructions in Colossians 3:2-tells us “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” The instructions in that letter are directed toward behaviors, those actions and attitudes designed to strengthen the community and those which will destroy it. Definitely both concerned with the direction that the lives of the covenant people, the disciples, that we should be following. How do these directional texts relate to the passage from Luke about possessions? Let's begin with how the Luke's passage began. The passage begins, like many of the stories or parables Jesus tells with a request for aid from the crowd which has gathered around Jesus. This particular request is raised by someone in the crowd who is not identified. The request is: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” We don't know if it is a young person or even if it is a male or female, or a frequent follower. We can probably assume

the request comes from a man because inheritance would not have been culturally a woman's concern in a dispute with a brother. All we know is that this request is for Jesus to interfere in a family matter, not a request for healing. And Jesus response is to quickly refuse saying to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" What he did instead was issue a warning, and not just to the one who made the request, but to those surrounding them: "And he said to THEM, '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 the central message of the text which led to the parable that Jesus told them about the rich man. Considering the culture which surrounds us with its images, slogans, and unceasing barrage about material possessions which tells us our having them will bring us happiness, this is a reminder we often need. We have a tendency to see these things and confuse our desire to have them as something that we then really need to have, like the marketing wizards intend us to feel. Our reality is that no matter how much we acquire to satisfy the emptiness within us. But there is always going to be something else out there—something newer, a better, improved version, or just more which we can acquire— and can add to the stuff we possess. And often we never quite feel that we have enough stuff...whatever the stuff is that we desire. So the question becomes...what is enough?

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. This passage began as an issue between brothers where one brother wanted the family inheritance divided with him. In telling the telling of the parable after the warning about greed, Jesus makes it clear that life is not about stuff, about money, about possessions, and collections—but rather it is about God and relationships. The parable begins with the information that the land of a rich man produced abundantly. The man is not wicked. He has not gained his wealth illegally or by taking advantage of others. The issue is not the wealth or how it was acquired. The key is that the land produced abundantly—God has given the man an unexpectedly abundant harvest. It is critical to understanding the parable what happens next. Verse 17: "And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'" When he notices his land has produced abundantly, the ensuing internal debate is self-centered—all seven thoughts. "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 and be merry.'" The conversation is not only to himself, but is also totally about himself, and only himself. There is no evidence that there is anyone else in his life, anyone else he cares about, anyone else who might have contributed to or could benefit from this bountiful harvest. Not even gratitude to God. 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 maximum benefit so that he can live comfortably into the future. This stated goal of the rich man fits well into the maxims of modern culture which encourages amassing, collecting and hoarding in response to a scarcity model of existence. The rich man's assumption is that he can secure his own future—that he can control it; that he needs no one and can successfully go it alone. Since the man already had barns which were sufficient to store a normal harvest, he was already a rich man when this unexpected abundance came. The issue was given abundance, what did he do with the abundance. He expresses no gratitude to God for the abundance; to the workers who would have harvested it; gives no thoughts to sharing it with others but plans

to expand storage to house it all and a self-congratulatory celebration. At this point, God enters the narrative, calling the man foolish. Verse 20: ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.’ So in a world where we all have “stuff”, probably too much “stuff”, what do we understand about this challenge about our lives. We need to think about those other directional texts from the lectionary in our effort to avoid being like the foolish rich man. We need to avoid the problem that this storing up of possessions represents in terms of the priorities of our lives. In some cases the things we have substituted for relationships are achievements or activities, especially in our culture those associated with employment. There are things that are used to substitute for what we truly need to be “rich” in this life. In many ways these things have become the “idols”, these activities the things we worship, and they turn us away from God and each other. The things we need which make for an abundant life are described by Jesus throughout the gospels—things like relationship, community, love, purpose—these may be less tangible than the “stuff” we acquire and possess and store; thus harder to count—but they are also more powerful than material goods, and more lasting. These are the kingdom things readily available to us through Christ. So we need to heed the words from Colossians, and then we will become rich toward God, find that in the deepening of that relationship we need a lot less stuff for it to be “enough stuff” to satisfy us.