

Beware of Distractions (Luke 12:13-21)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/beware-of-distractions/

There are certain passages in Scripture that assure me Jesus deeply understands what it means to pastor teenagers. There are the many times the disciples questioned Jesus. “Why are you talking to her?” “Why are we going there?” “How are we supposed to feed them with that?” There is the story of the doting mom who thinks her two sons are extra special, and Jesus should do them a solid by letting them sit on his right and left. And then there is today’s passage in Luke 12.

Jesus is teaching very important spiritual matters. With thousands gathered, Jesus is teaching from the heart with passion and conviction. Then, from the crowd, a man yells a request at Jesus completely off topic, a common occurrence in youth ministry.

It reminds me of one of my favorite cartoons by Inky Rickshaw.

(Cartoon description: Jesus preaching to crowd, “Be kind to everyone!”. “Wait, even Gary?” “Yeah, Gary’s the worst.” Jesus responds, “Look, we’ve been through this. Yes, be kind to Gary as well.”

A random guy, “Ha! Told you, losers.” Jesus responds with head in hand, “Not now, Gary.”)

We all know some Garys. (My apologies to the Garys here. And the Karens. It is rarely good when your name gets hijacked by culture to embody a stereotype.)

Back to Luke 12, Jesus is teaching on how to pray, giving stern warnings to religious leaders, teaching his disciples how to remain strong in the face of persecution, and Gary starts waving his hand, and yells, “Hey Teacher. Tell my brother to give me my fair share of the family inheritance.”

Not now, Gary.

That is probably what I would have said and moved on, ignoring him hoping he’d moved on. But Jesus, not pleased with the distraction but always the teacher, seizes the moment for a lesson. It was clear the man really hadn’t been listening to what Jesus was saying. He was physically present, but mentally and emotionally, he was distracted. Can anyone relate? Jesus was speaking, but he wasn’t really listening. This man’s attention was focused on money and family drama. He had an agenda, and he wanted, even demanded, that Jesus justify his agenda.

Remembering he said to be kind to everyone, even Gary, Jesus tells the man – your question, your agenda is not mine to deal with, and it is a distraction from what I am teaching and doing. But I’m not going to dismiss you. Instead, I’m going to tell you and everyone here a story about the dangers of distractions.

Before he tells the story, Jesus gives two warnings in v. 15 to set the stage. First, beware of greed, even the tiniest bit. New Testament Greek scholar William Barclay describes greed as a “accursed or doomed love of having” which “will pursue its own interests with complete disregard for the rights of others, and even for the considerations of common humanity.” Greed is a life-taking desire for something or someone that is all-consuming and all about you. Jesus says beware of greed, even the tiniest bit. And second, who we are is far more important than what we own. Don’t get the two confused.

Then, Jesus tells the story of a farmer whose land produced abundantly. Don’t miss what Jesus said in v.16 – “the **LAND** of a rich man produced.” I imagine Jesus said it this way for a reason. The farmer’s success was not his own doing, despite what he thought. It involved the sun and rain and soil and, most likely, hired hands. But the farmer isn’t thinking about anyone else, not even God. And this is the crux of the problem. This is why God calls the farmer a “fool.”

This title of “fool” is a bit confusing for many of us in the West who are taught to be wise and responsible, to invest in our future. This farmer has a thriving business, beyond its current storage capacity, so it seems smart to build bigger barns. Save for the future, enjoy your golden years.

In fact, in the story of Joseph in Genesis, we find Joseph praised and titled as “wise” for storing up grains in silos for the future. The act of saving itself is not the problem. It is the heart, motive, and the purpose of the one saving that makes the distinction. It is the priority given to what is possessed that is the problem.

Joseph, using his position and provisions, stored the treasure of food to be able to feed others during the anticipated years of drought. He was doing it in obedience to God and for the benefit of others in need. It wasn’t about him or his security.

When the rich farmer talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is himself: “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” “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. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’” (Luke 12:17-19). In this very short story, he uses the personal pronouns “I” or “my” eleven times!

With no thought of God or neighbor, he concludes the answer is to build bigger barns for his crops and his other goods, and then all will be well, and he will be safe and secure.

If we’re honest, there is something comforting about possessions, isn’t there?

In June, six from our congregation arrived at the St. Louis airport, said goodbye to our bags, and loaded the plane bound for our partners in Kenya. (Show picture.) After two years without international trips, we were eager to be back. After nearly 30 hours of travel on three planes, we finally arrived late at night at the Kenyatta International airport in Nairobi. After 30-40 minutes, we made it through customs, overjoyed to pick up our luggage and make our way to the hotel showers and bed.

But there was no luggage to pick up. We paced the long conveyor belts along with other weary travelers, hoping to catch a glimpse of the orange-white polka dot ribbons we'd tied to each bag. Nothing. We went through the piles of neglected luggage sitting at the fringes of the large room. Nothing. Eventually, one of the baggage attendants confirmed our fear ... there were no more bags left to unload.

Of our 10 checked bags – six personal bags and four ministry bags – only two arrived. And they were both ministry bags with balls, crafts, 100 fruit snacks, and manna from heaven – a large container of animal crackers.

I went to the lost baggage counter to make a report which they refer to as “property irregularity report.” We learned five bags were in London and three were still all the way back in Philadelphia, apparently scared to leave the country. Definitely some property irregularity.

We soon discovered this was a growing and pervasive trend in international travel these days. In fact, just a couple weeks ago, Delta loaded up a plane from the London Heathrow airport bound for the US with 1,000 pieces of lost luggage and zero passengers to reunite weary travelers with their belongings.

As good team leaders, Rand and I had prepared our team. We'd advised them to pack in their carry-on bags what they'd need to survive for two days in case our luggage was delayed or lost. What we didn't prepare for was almost four days of no luggage.

After working at the children's home for three days with only two more to go, we were finally reunited with our bags. The team were troopers, but I'll be honest, it was a bit challenging. I'm not going to name names, but someone did testify to how awful it was to wear the same underwear for four days.

When our luggage did arrive, we all realized the same thing. We had overpacked. We had far more than we needed, even those of us who have gone more than a dozen times. This experience revealed how much security we place on certain possessions and comforts. Did I wear the same outfit for three days and sleep in the clothes I flew over in? Yes. Was it gross? No. Did anyone at our children's home notice or care? No. Many wore repeat outfits as well because that is what they own. Did my missing possessions prevent me from being present with others? No. Will I remember this next time I pack for an overseas trip? I certainly hope so.

The gift of lost luggage was the invitation to check where our true security lies. Does it rest in my possessions, the things I surround myself with? Does it rest in our control over our lives and the ability to provide for ourselves? Or does our security rest in God? Do we trust God to provide what we need, to be enough for us and for one another? Most often, a capacity to trust God can only deepen as other matters lessen their grip in our lives. Sometimes the grip is only lessened thanks to British Airways.

In Kenya, God provided for our needs through the generosity and hospitality of others. We were dependent on our hosts to share their resources, and they did. But being dependent – whether on others or God – is a position many of us avoid at all costs.

The point of Jesus’s story about the distracted farmer is all about priorities. It is about who or what is truly God in our lives and who we depend on rather than what we depend on. It is about how our lives are aligned at our core: either toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our neighbor.ⁱ

After the rich man figures out his plan and declares he can relax, eat, drink, and be merry, God interrupts his dreams of blissful retirement with one word: “Fool.” The word occurs elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke only in Luke 11:40, with reference to the Pharisees; there foolishness is also associated with greed and with the neglect of justice and the love of God.ⁱⁱ Psalm 14:1 tells us that “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” In biblical times where nearly everyone believed in one or more gods, this most likely would not have been a belief that God does not exist, but rather there is no GOD here. No God here in this situation, in this decision, in my life that cares about how I live it.ⁱⁱⁱ If we hear “fool” with this understanding, how many of us acted the fool? How many times have we lived as if our day to day living and choices are of no concern to God, that there is no God here in this moment, in this decision? This farmer was a fool because he sees nobody but his own self – including God.

It is 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 Jesus spent time eating and drinking with people and enjoying life. But Jesus was also clear about where his true security lay.

Jesus, who sees past our words and actions to our hearts, knows what is at the root of greed. It is rooted in anxiety and fear. So, after his parable of the rich man, he continues in a more hopeful, compassionate direction in the next part of Luke 12 which is not part of the lectionary reading today but so vitally important to our understanding of why we can trust God.

Jesus tells us to look to the birds in the air and the lilies of the field, seeing how well God takes care of them and to trust that God, who values us so much more, will do abundantly more for us. Jesus speaks to our fear of scarcity with the promise that it is the Father’s good pleasure to give the kingdom itself to God’s children. And the way to receive that kingdom isn’t the earthbound, inward-looking, life-taking way of the rich farmer, but the life-giving way of the one who loves God and others generously and with joy.

The distracted man in the crowd, asking Jesus about his earthly inheritance, led to the story of the distracted farmer, storing up his earthly riches for himself without regard for God and others.

And both stories lead us to consider the distractions of today.

Beware of distractions. Beware of possessions, people, positions, praise, privilege, purpose, political party, or politician ... beware of anything or anyone that has become our source of safety and security, anything that we've made our savior other than Jesus Christ. Beware of anything or anyone that leads us to be concerned only with ourselves and disregard others. Remember Jesus's warning at the beginning of his story ... "Take care! Be on your guard against **all kinds of greed.**" Be on guard against anything or anyone we trust more than God, anything we love more than God and others. The sin is not in the possessing. The sin consists in making it the reliance and confidence of your heart. GK Chesterton said, "It has been said there are two ways to get enough. One is to accumulate more and more and more. The other is to desire less."

If we struggle to trust God is enough, if we realize our mind is set on things below rather than things above, if we find ourselves anxious and afraid, may the birds and the lilies be our teachers. God takes care of them. How much more will God take care of us, God's beloved? Perhaps it is indeed good to lose our luggage ever so often so we might gain freedom.

The third verse of one of my favorite hymns, *Be Thou My Vision*, says this:

*Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise
Thou mine inheritance, now and always
Thou and Thou only first in my heart
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art*

Friends, there is only one inheritance that matters, only one treasure we need. There is only one kingdom we belong to, only One King who must be first in our heart.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-3>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-2>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-07-29/luke-1213-21-2/>