

“He who dies with most toys wins.” That’s been a popular bit of bumper sticker wisdom for at least 20 years now. There was even an episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation with the title “The Most Toys” in 1990. In it, a collector of unique objects was revealed as a man who was willing to endanger the population of an entire planet and to torture and murder a colleague just to obtain one more “toy” for his collection: the android known as “Data.” That fictional character went to extremes but the sentiment expressed in his actions and by the bumper sticker is certainly familiar to us. Popular musicians as diverse as The Beatles, The O’Jays, Pink Floyd, The Grateful Dead, U2, and Kander and Ebb, writers of the musical “Cabaret,” have scored hits by singing about our seemingly insatiable desire for more and more of that “mean, mean, mean, mean green.”

Shari Goodhartz, the author of that Star Trek episode, is far from the first storyteller to use an exaggerated situation to point out the danger of the seductive powers of acquisition. Nearly 2000 years earlier, Jesus of Nazareth had told a seemingly outlandish story in order to make a similar point. For Ms. Goodhartz, the audience was a mass media culture at the height of the “Greed is Good” era immortalized by Oliver Stone’s Wall Street. For Jesus, the audience was much smaller – a large crowd gathered to hear his teachings and, in particular, one young man with a complaint.

Picture the scene, if you will. It’s been a busy day for Jesus. To follow the thread of the narrative in Luke, it would appear to be the day after his interaction with Martha and Mary in Bethany, the day which began with his disciples asking him to teach them to pray. He has healed a mute man, wrangled with opponents about the source of his power, admonished the crowd for seeking signs, had lunch with a group of Pharisees and lawyers and chastised them. Jesus and his disciples emerge from the meal to find an even larger and unruly crowd waiting for them. As Jesus counsels the disciples on how to deal with hypocrisy and adversity, he is interrupted by a man with his own agenda. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

It’s not as unusual a request as it might sound. Rabbis were often asked to interpret legal passages in the scriptures, such as inheritance codes. But this is more demand than request, coming at the mid-point of a day already filled with arguments and verbal traps. The great theologian John Knox, Father of the Scottish Reformation, compares this wealth-obsessed young man with the rich young ruler who was unable to give up his wealth to follow Jesus. According to Knox, “one senses more sympathy for (the rich ruler) than for this man. The difference is that the rich ruler came with a confession of his own need (‘What shall I do?’), while in the present passage the man comes with a charge against someone else.” According to Knox, Jesus gives this young man a frostier reception because, “Before God, we are (to be) confessors, not complainants.”

Perhaps it is the man’s attitude, perhaps it is the pressures of the day and the possibility of yet another hidden test, perhaps Jesus is still thinking of Martha’s demand the night before (“Tell my sister to help me”). At any rate, he’s not playing along. “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” I’m in agreement with those commentators that think the NRSV makes a weak translation choice here. According to one, in our vernacular it might be better said, “Mister, I don’t know who you are or what you’re talking about! I am not a judge and have no authority here at all.” If you doubt that Jesus is aggravated at this questioner, notice that he then

goes on to make him the negative illustration for some further teaching. The front of our bulletin this morning has part of what Jesus' says from the modern translation, The Message. "Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."

Jesus then goes on to do one of the things he does the best. He tells a story. I think he tells it in such a way as to win over the crowd as well as to teach them, to charm any who were plants of the Pharisees or friends of the fellow who he'd just criticized. It's a story with an obvious bad guy and some sly humor. The bad guy is the rich man, always a popular target with a peasant population. The humor – well, I like the way Clarence Jordan tells it in his "Cotton Patch" version: "A certain rich fellow's farm produced well. And he held a meeting with himself and he said, 'What shall I do? I don't have room enough to store my crops.' Then he said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my old barns and build some bigger ones in which I'll store all my wheat and produce. And I will say to myself, 'Self, you've got enough stuff stashed away to do you a long time. Recline, dine, wine, and shine!' But God said to him, 'You nitwit, at this very moment your goods are putting the screws on your soul. All these things you've grubbed for, to whom shall they really belong?' That's the way it is with a man who piles up stuff for himself without giving God a thought."

I don't know who used it first, Clarence Jordan or Flip Wilson, but I remember Flip using that line, "I said to myself, 'Self...'" and always getting a laugh on it on "The Tonight Show" and later on his own show. But whichever one of them used it first, they really got it from Jesus. Anybody who thinks Jesus wasn't funny just isn't reading closely enough. But I digress...

There are some things for us to notice in this story, some things for us to learn from. First of all, we should note, as Clarence Jordan put it, that the man "held a meeting with himself." He is alone. Commentator Kenneth Bailey writes, "This speech is not sad, rather it is pitiful. This wealthy, self-confident man has arrived, he has made it.... He needs an audience for his arrival speech. Who is available? Family? Friends? Servants and their families? Village elders? Fellow landowners? ...The gregarious Middle Easterner always has a community around him. But this man? He can only address himself."

Now, why would that be? Why would someone this rich and successful be all alone? Perhaps it doesn't bother him. He may not even notice that there is no one else around. Listen again to the repetitive nature of his "meeting with himself," this time from the NRSV: "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. And *I* will say to *my* soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" Notice that there is no thought at all of others, no consideration for sharing his goods with his neighbors or his family or the poor. No thoughts of a tithe, either. There are no thanks given to God in his thought, no concept of being blessed. Earlier, we sang "Amazing Grace," that lovely old hymn by slaver-captain-turned-preacher John Newton. Newton knew how God had blessed him. But for the rich man in Jesus' story, there is just simple self-satisfaction and self-centeredness. Perhaps this is why God addresses him as "You fool!" or "You nitwit." In living this self-centered life, he has completely missed out on the true riches of life – family, friends – and he has no one to blame but himself.

In the mid-Fourth Century there was a preacher, theologian and monk in what is now Turkey whose work and life are so revered by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches that he is known as Basil the Great. So beloved is Basil in the Eastern churches that in that tradition parents tell their children that it is St. Basil, not St. Nicholas, who brings gifts. Basil wrote on our passage and the foolish rich man: “What do we find in this man? A bitter disposition, hatred of other people, unwillingness to give. This is the return he made to his Benefactor. He forgot that we all share the same nature; he felt no obligation to distribute his surplus to the needy. His barns were full to bursting point, but still his miserly heart was not satisfied. Year by year he increased his wealth, always adding new crops to the old. The result was a hopeless impasse: greed would not permit him to part with anything he possessed, and yet because he had so much there was no place to store his latest harvest... *What am I to do?* It would have been so easy to say: “I will feed the hungry, I will open my barns and call in all the poor. I will imitate Joseph in proclaiming my good will toward everyone. I will issue the generous invitation: 'Let anyone who lacks bread come to me. You shall share, each according to need, in the good things God has given me, just as though you were drawing from a common well.'”

The rich man’s poverty of spirit is beautifully addressed in a story I read this week by Florence Ferrier about a social worker in poverty-stricken Appalachia. The social worker relates, “The Sheldons were a large family in severe financial distress after a series of misfortunes. The help they received was not adequate, yet they managed their meager income with ingenuity -- and without complaint. One fall day,” says the narrator, “I visited the Sheldons in the ramshackle rented house they lived in at the edge of the woods. Despite a painful physical handicap, Mr. Sheldon had shot and butchered a bear which strayed into their yard once too often. The meat had been processed into all the big canning jars they could find or swap for. There would be meat in their diet even during the worst of the winter when their fuel costs were high. Mr. Sheldon offered me a jar of bear meat. I hesitated to accept it, but the giver met my unspoken resistance firmly. “Now you just have to take this. We want you to have it. We don't have much, that's a fact; but we ain't poor!” I couldn't resist asking, “What's the difference?” His answer proved unforgettable. “When you can give something away, even when you don't have much, then you ain't poor. When you don't feel easy giving something away even if you got more'n you need, then you're poor, whether you know it or not.””

Mr. Sheldon is rich in a way that the rich farmer is not, for what Mr. Sheldon has, he possesses with equanimity, able to keep it, use it or dispose of it without concern. But the rich man is possessed by his possessions. Remember how Clarence Jordan translated the verse: “You nitwit, at this very moment your goods are putting the screws on your soul.” The rich farmer is obsessed with how to keep all his grain – how to have his cake and eat it, too, I suppose. Obsession can be a subtle and dangerous thing. One of my favorite books in my teen years was one of the first sports “tell-all” books, Ball Four by Jim Bouton. Bouton began his career as a major-league pitcher with the Yankees but wrote his book at the tail end of his career when he was with the dreadful Seattle Pilots and the only slightly better Houston Astros. At the end of the book, he remarks, “You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time.” The rich man in the story is gripped by his goods, just as Bouton was by baseball.

Part of the rich man's foolishness is that he has forgotten lessons that would have been familiar to the crowd that heard Jesus, for they were in the Scriptures. One of the Old Testament passages in today's lectionary is Ecclesiastes 2:18-21. It's on pages 477 & 478 in your pew Bible Old Testament. "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me — and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it." Likewise well-known to Jesus' audience would have been a similar passage in Sirach, which is found in our Apocrypha (page 57 of your pew Bible Apocrypha, if you're interested): (Sirach 11:18-19) "One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial, and the reward allotted to him is this: when he says, "I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!" he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies."

The rich man was certainly a nitwit for forgetting these basic lessons. Of course, he has plenty of company in our society. Methodist pastor Lawrence Wood tells the story of the late Edna Furbelow. "Her cupboards, bureaus, cabinets, garage, attic and spare bedroom have been crammed full of things that define her. ("Oh, you know Edna Furbelow," says her neighbor, "she collected Hummels.") Every once in a while, Edna took some of the clutter out to the front yard and sold it, although no one stepping inside her house ever knew the difference. Now that Edna has died, everything must go. It's too bad she's not here for the lesson, because there's something morally instructive about an estate sale. Absent the owners, the items lose their meaning, so that even Edna's kids and closest friends think, *My land, there's a lot of stuff here. What a lot of junk!* The agent, who doesn't want to haul it away, has priced everything low: books go for 50 cents, a big set of plates for a few bucks. Here is an old rusty bicycle from the Eisenhower era and a once-prized lamp that now seems hideous. Now the auctioneer calls out Lot 152, a collection of four hundred Hummels. Eyes roll and knowing smiles break out, but no one bids. The auctioneer looks at the estate agent, the agent looks at Edna's oldest daughter: a lifetime's hobby and a person's identity have come to this. It's almost possible to hear Jesus asking, *And these Hummels, whose will they be?"*

Jesus says that this is the way it is for "those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." But what does that mean, to be rich toward God? There are several answers, I think, some of which I've already mentioned. It's important to be rich in praise and thanks to God. Every time we come together in this place, we thank God for all of the good things God sends in our lives. It's a ritual that many of us repeat before meals or at bedtime with prayers as simple as "God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food." And every Sunday morning, we stop in the midst of our worship to put money in the offering plates or we send in checks to the church on a regular basis or as we can. This, too, is being rich towards God — sharing from what God has given us so that the work of our church can go on. And then there is the richness we express towards the God within each other. Jesus told his disciples how it would be at the end of all things: "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took

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care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

If the rich man in the story and the young man who petitioned Jesus to intervene in his family financial matters are the negative examples in our Gospel passage this morning, then it is worth remembering that Jesus is the positive example. Unlike the greedy man who could not bear to give away anything, Jesus gave away everything – his prerogatives as God, his life as a human – all on behalf of others, even the greedy ones and the angry ones and the ones who sought his life. In our lectionary epistle for the morning, Paul reminds the Colossians to follow the example of Jesus: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

The rich man’s granaries overflowed. He could have made bread to keep himself fed for years and years. But his soul was starved, famished. In Jesus, we have the Bread of Life, the true daily bread. Today we celebrate with bread that is broken, with the fruit of the vine that is crushed and poured out for us. As we gather around the Lord’s table this morning, may we remember that the spirit of Christ that binds us together in love is the spirit of giving, even to all we have, for the sake of our sisters and brothers. Amen.