

Rich Toward God, July 31, 2022, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Hosea 11.1-11; Psalm 107.1-9, 43; Colossians 3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21

Prayer

I think my favourite thing to preach on, from the gospels, is the parables. Jesus tells these short stories that seem to be so simple and yet, two thousand years later, we still puzzle over them.

Today's parable gives us a hint, though. We get an introduction to the parable to help us understand it.

Someone in the crowd says to Jesus, "teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Jesus' response seems quite reasonable: "who made me judge or arbitrator over you?" Jesus takes the very healthy approach of staying out of other people's business. Great! Well, except that as a Rabbi, this was something that people *often* asked for: judgements. It was a sign of respect that a Rabbi would be sought for a judgement. And, as is still the case today, there were often disputes over inheritance.

You probably already know that the eldest son was to be given a double portion of the property, so the man in the crowd who was asking for Jesus' assistance was probably a younger brother.

So, why wouldn't Jesus give him the judgement he was looking for? How hard would it have been for Jesus to have said what the lawful thing to do was? He could have even quoted something from the Bible to back up his judgement.

We know very little about the person in the crowd who asked Jesus to give him a judgement. But because Jesus is reluctant to give a judgement, the biblical commentators twist themselves into all kinds of knots trying to explain things: Jesus knows this man is trying to outdo his older brother; this man is clearly greedy; Jesus can tell that he has nefarious intentions with his share of the property; etc.

The truth is, we don't know *why* Jesus doesn't give him what he wants. But Jesus himself gives us a hint as to what was going on in that relationship. And Jesus does that by telling his audience a parable—a parable with a *further* introductory note, beyond just this encounter with the man from the crowd. Jesus says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." [It is really unusual for Jesus to explain the whole parable before he even starts telling it!]

The parable of the rich farmer (or, as it is often called, "The Rich Fool"), identifies greed as the central concern. The man has a great harvest, and he realizes that he can't possibly store all the food he has grown that year, so, he plans to tear down his barns to build bigger ones so that he might retire in comfort.

Remember how I told you that we still puzzle over the parables two thousand years later?

What has this man done wrong? Why is he a fool?

It seems to me that this man is entirely reasonable! He has worked hard, he had some luck, sure, but his farm has produced in abundance. He's got it made. So, he takes early retirement, knowing that he's set up for the rest of his life.

Isn't that what we're supposed to do? Isn't that what we've learned we're supposed to do? Isn't that even what the book of Proverbs talks about, frequently? Working hard, struggling, and saving up for when times get hard?

What is it that makes this man a "fool"?

Here again the commentators struggle to explain what is wrong. The most complicated example I read suggested that this rich farmer is manipulating the market: by storing up his crops (rather than flooding the market and driving the price *down*), he is creating an artificial demand for the crops and driving up the price. This allows him to sell small amounts of his reserve at exorbitant prices while at the same time starving his fellow compatriots. Apparently, the rich fool is OPEC.

I think that's a little more complicated than what Jesus was on about.

Remember, Jesus introduced this parable by telling his audience to be on guard against all kinds of greed since one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

I don't think Jesus was concerned that the younger brother was intending to manufacture a monopoly over an essential part of the market. But perhaps this younger brother, like the "rich fool" in the story, was seeking the abundance of possessions, perhaps as a means of security.

The man in the parable lacked something. As Jesus puts it, he was not "rich toward God".

But what does that mean? How is one "rich toward God"? How would one *not* be "rich toward God"? Many of us might be asking ourselves right now, "Am I 'rich toward God?'"

As the preacher of the church here on Sunday, this would be an excellent time for me to encourage you to be rich toward God. And we're going to take a special collection right now—let's pass the plate around.

No, of course, I'm not really going to do that. That would be manipulative and awful. But that's not the only reason why I'm not passing the plate around right now. I have to confess I don't fully know what it means to be "rich toward God". I'm interested in what that might mean, but I'm also fairly confident that simply giving money to this church doesn't tick that box, all on its own. Surely, being rich toward God means more than just that!

But what *does* it look like? How might we *practice* being "rich toward God"? How might we, both as individuals and as a community of faith move closer to being "rich toward God"? What might things look like if St. Timothy were a community that was *collectively* "rich toward God"? What kinds of gatherings would we have? Who would be invited to attend? What things might happen that were focused *beyond* our building and its contents? Does it have something to do with "being equipped for every good work"?

Being "rich toward God" is not something that we have *failed* at. It is a work in progress. We're all still learning how we might realize that goal—and we are starting to recognize that everything has shifted as a result of the last two years of this global pandemic; the goal posts have been moved. We don't have the same objectives that we once did. We're having to learn all over again just what it means to be "church" and how we might bear witness in the world that we live in. We still have some learning to do.

And since we are still learning and growing, it is helpful that we worship a God who is patient and kind and caring. Tender and forgiving, even in our mistakes and our development. It is this metaphor of

“God-as-parent” that we are introduced to in our first reading today, from the prophet Hosea. This week, Hosea has chosen a much different metaphor for the relationship between God and the people of Israel. It is one that perhaps more of us can identify with, as many of us are parents...but *all* of us are (or were) children. Perhaps *especially* if we have been parents ourselves we can feel the struggle that God shares through the words of Hosea. That anguish as we watch the child we have nurtured and cared for make terrible decisions that will lead to their harm.

“I taught you to walk; I cared for you; I nurtured and fed you; I rescued you from your hardship, and *still* you turn away from me. Still you spurn me and follow after others.”

Perhaps God’s anguish can resonate with those of us who have struggled as parents, especially when it comes to *discipline*. We know that it is hard for a parent to discipline the children they love—it’s often harder on the parent than it is on the child. But, as it says in the book of Proverbs, “Those who spare the rod hate their children,

but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.” (Prov. 13.24)

We see God anguish over this decision. The Northern Kingdom is about to be destroyed by Assyria—a fate that will *not* be shared by the Southern Kingdom of Judah—at least not yet. But God promises not to destroy them completely. They will not be wiped out. “How can I give you up? How can I hand you over?” Instead, God’s compassion grows warm and tender, thinking about the days when they will return from captivity and return home to their own land. And yet, even as God prepares for this period of exile, there is still hope for them; hope that even now they might mend their ways. That they might turn back and be saved, and avoid this awful trial.

For the second week in a row, the language of the prophet Hosea is difficult to manage. It’s hard to imagine the God that we worship speaking like that about the chosen people, no matter what they might have done. But, as before, we are reminded that this prophecy was not written to *us*. These words were intended for a particular people in a particular time and place. But that does not mean that we cannot learn from it.

So the question turns to us: where do *we* see ourselves in the text today? Are we the children of God, obstinate and rebellious, refusing to adhere to God’s loving and nurturing upbringing? Are we about to endure the discipline of God as we are (loving) chided and corrected?

Or perhaps we have been through that already. Perhaps we have learned a lesson and now are responding, somewhat sheepishly, to the call of our master, summoning us home once again.

Or maybe we’re neither of those two, but instead are farmers, working, striving, scrimping, saving, and planning for a long comfortable retirement where we might enjoy the fruits of our labour.

We need to ask ourselves, are we rich toward God? We still aren’t clear on what that means, but when we see ourselves in the text, is that how we see ourselves? Are we rich toward God and not relying on the abundance of possessions—both the things we have individually, but also the great treasure stores that we share in this church? If God were to call us home today, the things we have built up—whose would they be? Who would they benefit?

May almighty God continue to walk with us as we continue to grow and to learn. May we continue to experience God's warm and tender compassion, even when we make mistakes. And, may we know how to live lives that are rich toward God as we turn to God each day seeking our daily bread. Amen.