

# Wading River Congregational Church

## Sermons in Print

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**Gospel Reading.....Luke 12: 13-21**

**Sermon.....21<sup>st</sup> Century Souls**

Luke was an articulate author. His Gospel and the Book of Acts constitute a two-volume set of the life, times, and passion of Jesus as well as an authoritative account of the goings on of the Apostles and the emergence of the early Church. In Colossians 3:2, the Apostle Paul's reminds us to "set our minds on things above, not on earthly things". Paul was well schooled in the Hebrew Bible and understood the essential character for all humans to have one God, the Father Almighty. Jesus replies (Matt 22:37), "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Personal investment in "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed is idolatry" (Col 3:5b). The Church scholars placed these two readings in the Lectionary for today, with good reason, but there is a much greater lesson to be learned in the Luke verses if we take a deeper look at the text.

Biblical scholarship, as we all perform in Bible study groups or on our own, reveals new insights with every reading. The message is tailored by our life experience, the challenges of the current time, and most of all by the Holy Spirit which guides us to the light of the Word. The Parable of the Rich Fool spoken by Jesus on the surface seems to say, "Watch out in your lives, greed is a sin!" We are told of a "rich" man (maybe a 21 C hedge fund manager?) whose ground has yielded a great crop. The harvest will be so great that the rich man

is having a conversation with himself (he initially thinks) about how to resolve this dilemma of enormous abundance. "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." So he struggles with the question of what to do with such a good crop until he decides that he'll just need to tear down his current barns and build even bigger barns in which to store his abundance of wealth. He affirms his decision with an adaptation from Ecclesiastes (8:15), an often heard directive from one in abundance, "Take life easy; eat drink and be merry". The rich man's biblical training fails him, however, for he forgets the last portion of this verse from Ecclesiastes which adds "all the days of the life God has given him". The rich man, in some sense, has forgotten from Whom all blessings flow.

Now I could easily use this to take off on the current economic times, the horrific loss of jobs known everywhere, here in our Church, and preach the evils of tearing down smaller banks to erect bigger banks, big enough to be labeled "too big to fail", sort of "super-sized". But my sense was the translation of The Parable of Rich Fool in Luke was not complete. In particular, the phrase employed for the words of God (Luke 12:20) to the rich man ("You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.") did not link well to the 1<sup>st</sup> reading. So, I went to the Greek, to read the Gospel as Luke had written it.

In verse 12:19 of Luke, the Greek reads differently from the NIV translation. The Koine Greek reads, "And I say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years'". The Greek

tells us the rich man is in conversation, not with himself, but rather with his soul. The whole content of this section of the parable changes when we consult the actual text. We no longer have him in some casual conversation with himself over what to do about abundant crops. Rather, we have entered into a theological struggle between the rich man and his soul over the very implications of abundant possession.

The translators fell short in the key word, substituting ζωή (life) for ψυχή (soul), which makes all the difference in the world. For the Greeks, whose vocabulary was rich and precise in meaning, the soul was an incorporeal essence of a human being. To the Greeks, the soul was not synonymous with *spirit*. Whereas the spirit of a human, like the Holy Spirit, is transcendent, other-worldly, and divine, the soul was far more worldly, less transcendent and often in tension with the *spirit*. To give us a better understanding of the Greek employed by Luke keep in mind that formally speaking, the study of the soul is the number one major of college students in the U.S., we know it as “ψυχολογία” or “psychology”. The theological meaning of soul, which did not escape Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and others, is when employed as a verb, “ψυχή” means *to blow into in order to animate*.

So we now see the linkage between the message of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> readings, i.e., they focus our attention of our “souls”. I ask us all to think back just through last week and our experiences. Do we find ourselves struggling between our transcendent, divine-like spirit and our soul which finds itself unmistakably stuck in the thickness of life’s concrete issues, sex, lust, greed, evil desires and that straight path that was laid down by John-the-Baptist and trodden by Jesus when the Flesh dwelt among us. So our rich man is in conversation with his soul, struggling in some profound way. Now if he were truly a fool, his conversation would have been as translated in the NIV. “Oh, what should I do with this abundance?” But the facts are Jesus is trying to tell us that the rich man is struggling, just as we struggle in our everyday lives, in deep conversations between our spirit and our soul.

So why is this rich man a fool? Up to Luke 12:19, you might simply say he is “a good time fellow” and leave it at that. But there is more. In verse 16, Jesus starts the parable with important information.....”The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop”. Here Jesus baits the hook. Firstly, whose earth, nutrient, rain, and sunshine actually produced the crop? Jesus is echoing again the Greatest Commandment [Matt 22:36-40] (‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment), AND without question it is from God that all blessings flow. It is from the idolatry of abundance, of riches, of perceived good fortune, that this rich man has become truly a fool. So this answers the question honestly, i.e., prayers of thanksgiving are due to God for the blessings of a bountiful harvest. The rich man IS a fool. Secondly, the Greek literacy of this rich man, is truly poor. He says, “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years”. He speaks to his soul, but does not recall that the soul is the product of the breath of God which animates human life. Had he been a biblical scholar in the know of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) he would have linked his soul to the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. Jesus makes these connections for all who have ears to hear. We just needed a little help with the translation to understand why Jesus employs the term “soul” rather than “life”, as in the NIV translation.

Thirdly, Almighty God delivers the punch line (Luke 12:20), in Greek the text reads, “You fool! This very night your soul is being demanded of you.” God does not state that the rich man will die, since that is not the worst that can happen. The words of God tell him something more frightening, i.e., that tonight he may lose his soul! The very breath of God that mediates our lives between the organic messy everyday life of humans and our ethereal spirit and the Holy Spirit is in jeopardy. Friends, I tell you, when we lose our ability to understand the breath of God mediates the quality of life and interface with the Holy Spirit, we are lost. But what we should learn is that this loss of the connectedness with the Holy Spirit and with God is not a decision of the Almighty God, it is our decision. The rich man chose to become a fool and cast off his soul. Yet even when we build walls

between ourselves and God, even when we cast off our souls like ship at sea with no compass, my friends, the grace of God, the love of Christ, and our fellowship in the Holy Spirit remains constant and available, if only we seek it.

Finally, is this just a parable about souls, even 21<sup>st</sup> C souls, and financial greed? Hardly, for I hear in the words of Jesus powerful echoes to every corner of our everyday lives. It is not the abundance per se that is the issue, it is the sharing. So, you might say, I am not a hedge fund manager who received a \$1B bonus last year, how does this relate to me? Well, like the rich man, we all have been given gifts from God in abundance, gifts of life, community, and love, that, need I say, are more precious than gold? The estranged, love-lost rich people of our time decorate the news and I must say only reinforce what I have mentioned. But each of us has this wonderful abundance, gifts, just like the great harvest. So we can ask ourselves, can we make this lesson from Jesus relevant in our 21<sup>st</sup> C lives? I say “YES”. I learn from this congregation so very much. Last week Karen Perricone (at a service for her mother Sandra) said to me that she had come to realize that God had given her a great gift of hospitality and that this gift empowered her to share with others, sharing her blessings. I walked through the sanctuary the Sunday morning before VBS and was mesmerized the beauty of the murals, the abundance of hard work and love that created a wondrous new place for kids in the midst of our sacred worship space. I sensed the shared experience of my ordination with so many of you. Christian love, a gift from God, filled the church. One thing I know for sure, as we share with our fellow travelers on this journey, we can be sure that when the suffering and pain of our own less-than-perfect lives besets us, the abundance of gifts from God given freely to us all will be shared, to comfort us. This is the will of God. Let us pray.