"What Should I Do?"

Luke 12:13-21; Psalm 107:1-9, 43 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to your Spirit of generosity and give thanks for your abundant love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Y'all are familiar with the lectionary, right? The lectionary is a schedule of scripture readings, put together by scholars from numerous Protestant traditions, that suggests four passages for each Sunday of the year. It generally works on a three-year cycle, and it changes a little every time, because the dates of things like Easter and Pentecost and Advent shift a little each year. Most Sundays include something from the Hebrew scriptures, plus a Psalm, plus a Gospel passage and something from the Epistles. Sometimes, it's obvious why the creators of the lectionary put together the four passages they suggest for a given Sunday. Sometimes two of them seem like perfect partners, and the other two seem random. And sometimes any connection at all is hard to find.

There are actually a couple different versions of the lectionary out there. The one that Disciples use, along with most other mainline Protestants, is called the Revised Common Lectionary. And as with everything Disciples do, we're not required to use it; it's just a resource available to preachers. It can help us keep ourselves from preaching on just our favorite passages over and over, by reminding us of what else is in there. It can be both an important discipline and a helpful tool.

I mention all of this because I was really struck by the way the two stories we heard today collide, if we'll let them, though I have no idea if the creators of the lectionary intended for them to do so. But really, these two stories get even more interesting if we let them bump into one another. But let's look at them separately first.

There are some interesting things to notice in the passage we heard from Luke. We'll come back to the introduction, this question about dividing an inheritance that prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the rich man building bigger barns. What's odd to me in that story is the almost total absence of other people. The rich man is enjoying his wealth alone; he is pondering how to handle his excess crop yield alone. We can probably assume that he wasn't farming that land himself or destroying the old barns and building the new ones himself, but none of the workers are ever mentioned. The only other active participant in this story is God. There is some implication here that the rich man's relationship with his wealth was entirely between him and God. That's important to recognize.

But even though no other characters were mentioned, that doesn't stop us from identifying with them. People who have worked for a rich man are probably going to see the unnamed farm workers in this story, tolerating the boss's greed while being paid pennies. Those who have worked in construction can imagine the disgust the builders must have felt in being asked to tear down perfectly good barns to build entirely new ones, instead of just adding onto the existing structures.

And this construction project brings up another question: if this man had time for a whole demo and re-build, during which he presumably had nowhere to store his crops, does that mean he was making assumptions about the success of his fields, perhaps counting his chickens before they hatched? Any smart farmer knows you can't count on the harvest until the harvest has happened. Bugs or rain or drought can kick in to ruin everything, even at the last minute.

So there are a lot of reasons to decide this rich man is foolish and arrogant, and none of us feel that bad when God shows up to announce his fate. The very fact that none of the other people who must have been involved in this story are mentioned emphasizes the rich man's isolation from others and the consequences of that.

In Psalm 107, on the other hand, the story begins with a group of people. In fact, all the way through, this psalm of thanksgiving tells stories of God's deliverance, and it's always for a group of people, rather than an individual. The passage we heard today just gives us the first story, of the people lost in the desert. But there's an assumption buried in here that we need to identify. The difficulty these folks are facing is that they cannot find a way to "an inhabited town." Once they've cried out to God and received deliverance, they reach "an inhabited town." What's so beautiful about that is the assumption the psalm makes about the role of the inhabited town. The psalm assumes that it is obvious that once these hungry and thirsty people reach civilization, they will be taken of. In this instance, the unnamed townspeople are agents of God, satisfying the thirsty and filling the hungry with good things.

Now, on the one hand, it may seem obvious that if a lost person or group of people managed to wander into a town in the wilderness, that whoever they found first would help them out and offer them food and water. But is that really how the world works? Do we still understand God's expectation that we feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty? Or do we start asking questions about why they didn't bring provisions with them, or shouldn't they have to show willingness to work for their food before we just offer it?

Feeding the hungry, especially when they've been through a life-threatening ordeal, is the bedrock of biblical ethics. It's the minimum that is expected of anyone who has more than another. "Some have entertained angels" by doing so, scripture tells us. And yet, we live in a world where children go to bed hungry every night and strangers who make it out of the desert into an inhabited town are detained rather than welcomed. Meanwhile, there are plenty who are eating, drinking, and being merry.

So what happens if we allow these stories to collide? Did that rich man live in an inhabited town? He must have at least lived on the outskirts of one. So he's sitting around, trying to figure out how to store his abundant harvest. "What should I do?" he asks himself. And what if the answer wanders onto his farm right then, in the form of a group of hungry, thirsty, dirty, exhausted wanderers who weren't sure they would live to share another meal? What if, instead of letting his greedy arrogance raise the ire of God, the rich man decided to become the agent of God, satisfying the

thirsty and filling the hungry with good things? What if, instead of building new barns, he built some pavilions in the backyard and some nice, long picnic tables, and maybe even a bandstand, so the life-saving meal could turn into a party?

"Let those who are wise give heed to these things," the psalm concludes. So let us reflect on what we learn when these two stories collide. "Be on guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus had warned the crowd. To me, that means we need to think about the way this story might apply to us, even if we don't have any reason to identify with the rich man. His story makes me think about someone whose income has increased enough to push them into a new tax bracket. And then the question becomes, do they search for tax shelters that will hide their wealth while still hoarding it, or do they look for ways to give away even more money to those in need?

But there are many forms of greed, as Jesus implies. The demand that inspired Jesus to tell this story points toward one. "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." That's an odd request in a culture where the first-born son was just supposed to inherit everything. Were they twins? Had the elder brother neglected the parents? Why was this even a question? But in our context, we know that dividing inheritances is often when family gets the ugliest. Suddenly, we're obsessed with "fair" which is often just a cover for greed. Greed can be a desire for "fair," or just a desire for more. Sometimes it's relational: we don't just want more in general; we want more than someone else. And sometimes, it's about seeking security in all the wrong places: if we just have enough, we think, we'll finally feel safe.

As the focus on the rich man in his isolation and his too-late dialogue with God implies, much of this question is between each of us and God. I often tell myself this when asked by someone on the street for money. If I start wondering what they're going to do with the couple bucks I might give them, I have to remind myself that my decision about whether to give anything is what God is going to talk to me about, not what happens after that.

But the rest of the story makes clear that our relationship to our stuff is so much bigger than ourselves. There are people lost in the desert right now. God wants them to be able to depend on the hospitality of an inhabited town once God has led them there. Do you want to be an inhabitant – part of a community – an agent of God satisfying the thirsty and filling the hungry with good things? Or do you want to be a rich fool, who can only see the problem of how to store all your stuff, without realizing that the easiest solution is to share?

When we let these two stories collide, we are both convicted – for we know Jesus is right that there are many kinds of greed – and saved, for we discover that the antidote to greed is gratitude. Let us thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. Let us give thanks that we are invited to be part of those wonderful works, satisfying the thirsty and filling the hungry with good things. Let us be wise and give heed to these things. Thanks be to God! Hallelujah and Amen!