

BIGGER BARNs

Luke 12: 13-21; 32-34

This weekend, Americans will be celebrating our freedom as a nation. But honestly, don't you think this freedom thing can sometimes cause us a lot of trouble? Oh, we love being able to come and go as we please, even travel around the world. We are so happy to make a living, purchase larger and larger homes, cars, and anything else we desire. We certainly want to be able to join the Church of our choice and worship God as our conscience dictates. But this freedom business can also cause us some difficulties. At least that's where our Gospel seems to lead us this morning.

I don't know about you, but when I hear about an athlete being offered a contract for \$272 million dollars by a baseball team, I'm shocked. The salaries of professional athletes as a whole cause the average person to sputter in indignation, and our children to grow up with a false hope of being one in ten million players who will make it. On top of that, we then watch many then fall victim to drugs, alcohol, and every variety of temptation and sin that all that money provides, we shake our heads.

Congress debates the estate tax and we find billionaires not paying tax at all and the middle class? We're just as guilty as anyone else. We are accumulating more possessions than ever before. Did you know that one of the faster growing segments of the gross national product today is the storage business? You want a good investment, buy storage! Investors can't build these mini-storage units fast enough. They provide safe, temperature-controlled environments in which to store our stuff. On Marco Island, Florida, they actually built a storage unit for automobiles to be stored during the summer. Temperature controlled no less. We have no room at home. Americans are building bigger barns, and they frequently look like storage units – or possibly my basement or garage.

Now, don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with that, unless we develop the barn building syndrome that afflicted the landowner of today's text. Faced with increasing fortunes and possessions, the man pondered his next move.

However, we have to remember that there was a reason this story was told and passed on, it was well known that during that time, landowners often abused their workers and even defrauded them out of their wages. And being poor, they had little or no recourse but to accept whatever payment was doled out at the end of the day.

And did you notice the pronouns in this brief passage? "I, I, My, I, I, My, I, My, My, I, My so said the farmer whose soul was enjoying what his land had produced and the workers in the field had harvested. He was wondering where to store it all! Jesus countered, "Take care. Guard against greed. Life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions."

The trouble with possessions is that, if we aren't careful, the freedom to gather possessions can possess us! The "I, Me, Mine" refrain is very popular in human song, especially for those whose philosophy is "enough is never enough." That's why we build houses with three car garages, tool sheds, storage units – to store all that stuff.

Yet, certainly we don't want to think of barns as bad. Jesus didn't think so. He just thought we didn't always need to build bigger ones – that enough could actually be enough. Perhaps we might share the abundance with others?

Here in America, barns were once synonymous with being American. From Montana to Maine, big barns, small barns, stone barns, log barns, plant barns, round barns, square barns, banked barns dotted the American landscape. A barn was and is a place where farm tangibles – like animals, feed and machinery were stored. If you farmed, you needed a barn! Many of these barns are now museums – they tell a story.

But did you know that the architecture of the barn came directly from the Church? The clever brains and rough hands which conceived and constructed European cathedrals and monasteries also built barns – and quite naturally in a similar style.

The banked barns, popular in Ohio, show the influence of church architecture. It's a two floor rectangular barn that is normally built into a hillside.

The upstairs layout suggests a basilica with the center bay inspired by a nave, and the side bays reflect church aisles. Notice the irony here? Jesus warns us about being barn-building fools, yet the barns we build are modeled after the places where we worship the one who warned us about barns!

Jesus is not denouncing barns. He does, however, ask people who are as invested in barn building as this rich man in the text was if they should not also have time to build the kingdom of God. Can't they spare the energy for advancing the agenda of God, or have they lost sight of divine priorities? Have they begun to be blind in their growing and deathly materialism, to say nothing of their selfishness and lack of generosity toward those truly in need?

The text is a warning not to let our souls sink so low beneath the weight of "stuff" that we lose a sense of what's really important in our lives. The rich farmer, poor in heart, worships his desires made possible by his possessions. He adores the idea of his success. His thinking centers on success alone, believing possessions will satisfy his soul. He becomes a barn building fool.

A month ago when I packed quickly to drive to Illinois at the death of my mother, I grabbed clothing without much thought. I would need "funeral clothes" but other than that, I wasn't really thinking what I would wear. But each day as I arose and showered and grabbed something to wear that day, I realized that all those clothes at home in my closet didn't mean a thing. And at night, after the service and greeting so many friends and relatives and sharing the day with family, not one of six children was thinking about cars, houses, furniture, clothing or any of our accumulated possessions. When I met with my sister to make arrangements and sign documents, other than for legal purposes, the contents of a safety deposit box were meaningless.

Our journey together was filled with two things: faith and family. Faith that our Mom was at peace and that whatever it is that happens as we enter eternal life could be counted on to be alright. We knew that Mom never doubted that for a moment – that God was with her and with all of us in that grieving time.

Faith and family – gathered together to remember, to weep, to laugh, to support one another. We made decisions based on Mom's wishes and on the premise that God's will would be done. We were able to do what had to be done because of our faith in God and one another. And as with any family, not everyone always agrees, but we love each other in spite of those differences.

When I think about Jesus' ministry and the rich man in the lesson this morning, I wonder if he ever thought that perhaps he could indeed die. And what would happen to all that grain? All those big barns? Like most of us, I'm sure he lived day to day without much thought about those things.

Peter Gomes is a wonderful theologian from Harvard Divinity School who commented on this when he observed the funeral of Aristotle Onassis many years back. The big speculation of the day was "How much did he leave? At a preaching conference that summer, amid the speculation, Gomes replied: "He left everything!"

Most of us don't consider ourselves rich, but the people to whom Jesus addressed these words would. And today, 80% of the world's population considers us rich and then wonder why we're not happy.

We hear the story of the impossible task of the rich entering heaven. Jesus didn't say it was impossible. He said it would be difficult and used the story of the camel passing

through the eye of the needle gate in Jerusalem. It wasn't about a needle. It was about the small gates into the city that were very low and narrow. Rather than go around to the large city gate, a camel could actually get through one of the small gates, but it would have to be brought to its knees and be pulled as it crawled through on its knees – not an easy trick for a camel carrying silks, figs, carpet and gold from afar.

Being rich, possessing an abundance of belongings, isn't the problem. Forgetting God and the needs of God's people is the problem. Forgetting to get down on our knees and thank God – that's our problem. And Jesus notes this irony. The man in our story thinks he is the creator of his own wealth. Jesus says, "Not so." It is the land that produced the abundant crop. God gave him his blessing.

Where and how we store our stuff – in a barn, or an attic, or a garage isn't a problem. The problem is our attitude toward ourselves and our God. That's why we gather here in this sanctuary and invite others to come into our family. We gather to point ourselves in the direction of others. This church stands as a holy reminder that our possessions are just that – stuff. And unless we do something with all God has given us, we can build bigger and bigger barns, but in the end, what have we done with our freedom? Our lives? What have we accomplished?

One of our recent new members said to me, "I wanted to join the church to do something, to make a contribution." That's a far cry from the "I, I, Me, and My" notion that seems to motivate so many people today.

Dechardin once wrote: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."

Greed makes us forget that we are spiritual beings. We were not created to be barn builders. We were born to look carefully at our abundance and ask ourselves, "What would God have me do with all this?"

We have the freedom to choose – whether to be generous, loving and giving Christians, or to simply become selfish and narcissistic.

The Church is the place that constantly challenges us with questions. The Church is the family that calls us to accountability. The Church is the place that nurtures and encourages our faith. The Church is where Jesus Christ himself lives and moves.

At the table of the Lord this morning, we once again are reminded that we have the freedom to choose. Do we choose the way of Christ? Amen.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Joy A. Baumgartner
Interim Senior Minister, Plymouth Congregational Church
Lansing, Michigan July 3, 2011