



**“Settling the Estate”**

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Luke 12: 13-21 (NRSV)***

This past week, I made a whirlwind trip home to preside at the funeral of my Great-Aunt Dorothy, who died on Monday night at the age of 83. Few people in my experience have been more prepared or mater-a-fact about their own death than my Aunt Dorothy. She prearranged and prepaid her funeral at a local mortuary more than fifteen years ago, and she made me promise on several occasions when I was in my twenties that I would preside at her funeral. So, I was glad that circumstances were such that I could make good on my promises, and equally glad that I didn't have any problems getting to Iowa and back in two days.

I think you would have liked Aunt Dorothy, and that she would have blended right in at Eden if she had moved here like so many of the Midwestern-born seniors in our congregation. Dorothy was the last of 13 children born to my great-grandparents, Charles and Emma Benesh Chesick, on their farm near Gladbrook, Iowa.

My most remarkable memories of Aunt Dorothy are from my childhood. She made quite an impression on me as farm kid who never spent more than a couple of days in a “city” with a population over 2000 before I graduated from college.

Unlike all of her older siblings who were farmers, Dorothy set her sights on the bright lights and big cities of Iowa. As soon as she turned 16, she packed a bag, took the train to Waterloo, and got a job as a waitress at a donut shop, where she met and later married her husband, Norm. Together, Dorothy and Norm had two children, and enjoyed a very different (citized) lifestyle than the rest of our family.

I remember Aunt Dorothy as “the fun aunt.” She liked to play games, tell stories, and watch baseball. She wore make-up and lipstick seven days a week, and had beautiful dresses with matching hats, gloves, purses, and shoes. At family gatherings, she was the life of the party, regaling us with stories of far-off places like Des Moines, Dubuque, and Chicago. As a woman who left the farm, became

pregnant out of wedlock, and married a divorced man, she was living proof that you could hoe your own row and not get tossed out of our family.

Now that I am fully identified—for different reasons—as one of those family members who hoed her own row, I marvel at Dorothy’s courage, tenacity, and strength, which she exhibited in her living and in her dying.

I suspect that she felt the need to prepare for her funeral, because she was surrounded by death all of her life. She was preceded in death by her parents, siblings, and husband. She became a widow in her early 30s, raised two children, put her daughter through nursing school, and paid-off the mortgage on a waitress’s salary. Her hardscrabble upbringing, compounded by the challenges of widowhood and single parenting at an early age likely reinforced her natural tendencies toward prudence and planning, including prearranging her funeral.

For most people, personal hardships, life-threatening medical diagnoses, and headline news about collapsing bridges prompt us to ponder our own finitude, but matters such as our last day on this earth, the meaning of life, and the afterlife are not topics that healthy people otherwise tend to dwell on.

Nevertheless, these are the topics of today’s gospel reading, and topics that ideally we would give consideration at times other than a crisis. Perhaps today could be one of those days when we reflect on our life’s purpose and priorities, and how we exhibit them, and determine whether we sense an alignment of our espoused purposes and priorities with our actions and with the teachings and example of Christ. To begin our reflection, let’s recall the text for today’s sermon.

## II

According to Luke, Jesus was on a long road trip from Samaria to Jerusalem teaching, preaching, and healing, when a Jewish man in the crowd asked him to remediate a case he had against his elder brother over their father’s estate.

The custom in those days and in the Ancient Israelite culture was that when a man died all of his assets were bequeathed to his eldest son, who was expected to manage the family assets in a manner that best ensured the whole family’s wellbeing.

Clearly, in this case, the younger brother believed that he had not been treated fairly, and he hoped that Jesus would make a judgment that would grant him a larger portion of his father’s estate.

The man’s request of Jesus was not unusual. He saw Jesus as a religious leader with the authority to settle legal matters for the Jewish people, like Moses, the Judges, and the ancient prophets had before him.

Despite the appropriateness of the man's request in light of Torah, Jesus refused to adjudicate the matter because he sensed that the younger brother's struggle was ultimately a spiritual matter and not a legal one.

I suspect that most of us know of legal disputes that would have been better settled through earlier intervention with a family counselor, a pastor, or a frank but neighborly conversation with a friend. But in the absence of early intervention, emotions spiked, the involved parties defaulted to their lowest-common-denominator behavior, and the only people who gained from these disputes were the lawyers—most of whom know that judges do not possess the power to heal the kind of hurt that causes people to seek legal remedies to these kinds of grievance.

In the case of the younger brother who contests his father's estate in Luke 12, we have only his account of the family dispute. So we cannot be sure of how Jesus read his elder brother's behavior, but we do sense that Jesus saw the younger brother as a man with a sense of scarcity that material wealth could never satisfy. Jesus saw the younger brother's needs as spiritual rather than material, and knew as a consequence that reappportioning the father's estate would never resolve the younger brother's issues, and might, in fact, have the opposite effect of compounding his problems.

Instead of providing the younger brother with what he wanted—which was a larger portion of his father's estate—Jesus told the man what he needed to hear for his own wellbeing. Jesus said, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then Jesus told the parable of the rich fool to reinforce his point that life's purpose is *not* to die with the most stuff, but to seek the wellbeing of the community as one seeks the wellbeing of oneself. The parable goes like this:

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 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.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

With this parable Jesus strove to inspire the younger son to face his finitude, to realize what matters most in life, and to make better choices before his life was over.

### III

On the face of it, the parable of the rich fool points to the old adage, “You can’t take it with you,” and calls to mind the Pulitzer-prizing wining play, and the 1938 Academy Award winning movie based on it. Both are titled *You Can’t Take it With You*.<sup>1</sup>

I was reminded yesterday of a popular twist on this old adage that was expressed in a recent parade entry in a small-town celebration back home. The parade entry was sponsored by a local lawyer, who drove an old hearse behind which he pulled a U-Haul. The placards on either side of the hearse read, “Since you can’t take it with you, let us help with your estate plans.” (Iowans can be pretty darn funny, and straight-forward, like my Aunt Dorothy.)

Like this rather provocative parade entry, the parable of the rich fool reinforces the fact that we can’t take our material possessions with us. This is true, and one of the points that Jesus made in Luke 12, but there’s more.

Some think that this parable is a judgment against persons of wealth, but I disagree; neither Torah nor Jesus condemned the wealthy for the mere fact of their means. In Ancient Israel, for example, prosperity gained through just means was considered a sign of God’s blessing. Jesus’ didn’t refute this supposition. John Calvin, the great Swiss reformer, whose theology was formative for half of Protestantism, made a similar point.

In today’s gospel reading, there is no indication that the rich fool had ill-gotten gains, so the critique of his situation was not that he was a person of means, but that the fool failed to share what he had for the benefit of the community. Chapter 12 ends with the well-known declaration: “To those whom much is given, much is required.” Clearly, the rich fool either didn’t get the memo, or he failed to adhere to its directive.

So, the implied critique that Jesus makes of the rich man in today’s reading is not that the man is wealthy, but that he has become rich by living solely for himself and in the singular pursuit of material gain, without regard for the needs of others or for his own spiritual wellbeing or the health of his relationships with others and with his community.

I suspect I’m preaching to the choir when I say that true happiness and personal fulfillment are not born of self-interest or the accumulation of things, but from a well-grounded spiritual life, from loving relationships, and from sharing what we have with others.

I suspect that we would agree that education either in the school of life or a university system is of little value without someone with whom we can share what

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_Can't\\_Take\\_It\\_with\\_You#Play\\_Synopsis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_Can't_Take_It_with_You#Play_Synopsis).

we have learned. I suspect that we would agree that there is little pleasure in having a beautiful home if we never invite others to enjoy it with us. And, I suspect that we would agree that lucrative employment is no reward if such work holds us hostage from spending time with our loved ones.

To be sure, we live in a culture that encourages self-interest and materialism, and yet we worship a God who calls us to a radically different way of life—to a life that demonstrates equal concern for ourselves and others, and to a lifestyle that places a greater value on our spiritual lives and interpersonal relationships than on the accumulation of material wealth.

It is not easy to live a life reflective of gospel values without succumbing to the materialistic values of our larger culture, which is one reason why many of us are part of this church. We long to be with likeminded people, to be part of a community that shares and reinforces our values, and strives to exemplify these values every day, in every way that we live our lives—for the benefit of each of us, and especially for the benefit of our children.

#### IV

What follows are three quick examples of how we might live out these values this week:

- 1) One way that we can express gospel values is by advocating for the welfare of vulnerable populations in our larger society. This week, for example, Eden COR members are joining people of faith across the US in advocating for full funding of health insurance for the 27,000 uninsured children in Alameda County, and the 9 million uninsured children in the US, by advocating for a stronger bill than the one which is currently before the U.S. Senate. For more information about the bill, stop by the Spirit In Action bulletin board in the West Wing on your way to Fellowship Hour. Or see one of our Eden COR leaders (Betsy Lauchstedt, Lynda Watson, or Michael Stuber) at fellowship hour, or contact Mark Unbehagen, Kyle Lovett, or me by phone or email this week. Take 10 minutes to have your voice heard. The phone numbers and information are listed on the bulletin board. I will be making my phone calls tomorrow and I hope that you will join me.
- 2) Another way we can live out the gospel values espoused in Luke 12 is to take a step back from any bungled estate settlement issues that we may be close to and consider what these challenges are saying about the spiritual and emotional needs of those involved. Rather than dwelling on the past and old hurts, which is so common and often not very helpful, let's ponder how the spiritual and emotional needs of persons involved might be better addressed going forward, and try to identify and act on steps that could bring about healthy change in our own situations.

- 3) A third way that we might act on the gospel values that Jesus espoused in Luke 12 is by taking a page from my Aunt Dorothy's biography, and following her example. Dorothy was the daughter of immigrant farmers who barely survived the Depression. Though she wanted to go to high school and college, she never did, because the family needed the income that she and her siblings could make just to feed the family. The most money she ever made was waiting tables on holidays at a supper club in West Des Moines. So she was never rich. She wasn't even middle class. But like many of the people who made Eden Church great, Dorothy not only survived the deaths of many loved ones, she paid off her mortgage, put her daughter through nursing school, raised two children on her own, and shared what she had with others without much thought of what she might gain in return. On Friday afternoon at her funeral, I read a poem that her daughter, Beverley, wrote about her mother. The final line of the poem goes like this: "She was not rich but I guess she was smart, 'cuz she did all these things with a great big heart."

## V

It is not easy to avoid the seduction of materialism. It is not easy to avoid becoming the younger brother, or the rich fool, but it is possible.

Each of these examples and many more demonstrate that it *is* possible to avoid the seduction of the materialistic culture in which we live, and it *is* possible to pass on gospel values to the children in our families and our church.

It is possible, because Christ has shown us the more excellent way, and he has set us in this community to support and encourage each other as we live out the values that he taught us. Thanks be to God. Amen.