



“We’re Rich!”

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Hayward, California***

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

Today’s gospel reading reminded me of a parade entry in my hometown celebration known as “Sweet Corn Days,” circa 1980, when I was in high school. The particular entry that I recall was sponsored by the local law firm. Yes, there was (and is) only one law firm in town, and for as long as I can remember, it has had only two lawyers.

The parade entry featured by our town lawyers included the two of them riding in the front seat of a hearse that they borrowed from the local funeral home. One gentleman drove the hearse, and the other sat in the passenger seat and tossed out candy to the children. Behind the hearse the lawyers pulled a U-Haul, and on both sides of the hearse they posted signs that read, “Since you can’t take it with you, let us help you with your estate plans.” (That’s Midwestern humor for you at its finest!)

Like my hometown lawyers’ provocative parade entry, today’s gospel reading makes a poignant argument about getting one’s affairs in order before it’s too late.

In Luke 12, we learn that a man’s younger son believes that he has been treated inequitably in the settlement of his father’s estate, and so he has come to Jesus, a respected spiritual leader in his community, and asked for a ruling—ideally a ruling in his favor—about these matters.

Jesus understood, as did his audience, that one could not take material possessions into the afterlife. So he wasn’t trying to clear up any possible differences between his views of the afterlife and, say, for example, Egyptians’ views of the afterlife. Egyptians believed that one could take material possessions with them into the afterlife, which is a belief that compelled the Pharaohs to construct the pyramids in the Valley of the Kings.

So, then, if everyone around Jesus believed that you couldn’t take your things with you, what was the point of Jesus’ Parable of the Rich Fool?

Some people think that the parable is a judgment against persons of wealth, because Jesus contrasts the value of material wealth with spiritual treasure. Based on my general knowledge of Jewish and Christian scripture, I disagree with this hypothesis. Here's why: neither Torah nor Jesus condemned the rich for being prosperous. In fact, prosperity gained through just means was considered a sign of God's blessing in Ancient Israel. There is no biblical evidence that Jesus refuted this proposition. Furthermore, John Calvin, one of the two most important Protestant reformers, made a similar argument in the sixteenth century, which has profoundly affected European and American Protestant theology.

In today's gospel reading, for example, there is no indication that the rich fool achieved his wealth unjustly. The problem, rather, lies in the fact that the fool was only concerned about personal gain. He showed no interest in sharing what he had with others.

II

According to Luke, Jesus was on a long trip from Samaria to Jerusalem teaching, preaching, and healing, when a young Jewish man whose father had just died stepped out of the crowd and asked him to rule on a case he had against his elder brother regarding their father's estate.

(It may be helpful to know that the custom in those days, and in the Ancient Israelite culture when a man died, was that all of his assets were bequeathed to his eldest son, who was expected to manage his brothers' assets in a manner that ensured the whole family's wellbeing.)

Clearly, the younger brother believed that he had been given less than his fair share. So he hoped that Jesus would rule in his favor and allocate a larger portion of his father's estate to him.

Jesus refused to make a judgment on the matter and threw the case out of court. Then he challenged the younger brother to face his own sense of greed—which is another way of saying that Jesus challenged the man to face his own sense of spiritual deprivation.

I suspect that we can all think of legal disputes that would have been better settled out of court with a family counselor, a professional mediator, or a pastor. But instead of settling out of court, emotions spiked, those involved defaulted to their most primitive behavior, and the only people who went home winners were the lawyers.

Based on my observations, disputes over estates are very common and rarely resolved to everyone's satisfaction. It seems that this is because these disputes are more often about emotional and spiritual issues that underlie the desire for a

bigger share of the family pie, than is expressed in the economic issues being debated in the courts.

Feelings vary, but the most common underlying concern that seems to feed family feuds over estate matters is a sense of scarcity. Such feelings are a sign of spiritual and emotional deprivation, and get expressed in views such as these: "I'll never have enough. Mom and Dad liked you better than me. And, I deserve more than you (or all the others), because I earned more than you did/I need more than you need/etc. (You fill in the blank.)

Most people aren't proud of these sorts of feelings, if they are even aware of them. So it's normal to develop rational arguments to undergird one's case and rationalize the dispute that's underway. While such intellectual gymnastics may make us feel a little better, they usually fail to address the emotional and spiritual privations that have fostered them.

As Luke 12 reveals, the God whom we worship sees through our "smoke and mirrors" rationalizations, and challenges the emotional and spiritual hungers that may propel our accumulation of things as an end in itself, and that may foster self-interest to the exclusion of others' needs.

God sees through our rationalizations, just as Jesus saw through the rationalizations of the younger son, when he said to him:

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. 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.

We don't have to be biblical scholars or theologians to know that we all die, or to know what greed is, or to covet what another possesses. These phenomena are a natural part of our experience. *How, then, do we successfully face our own demise, and cope more successfully with human tendencies toward greed and covetousness in a materialistic world which fosters a sense of scarcity?*

The great Jewish and Christian prophets and teachers are unanimous in their view that greed and covetousness are grounded in spiritual deprivation. Our hunger for material things is grounded in a spiritual hunger. If we feed the spiritual hunger, then the appetite for material things is satisfied. And when our appetite for spiritual things is satisfied, we no longer clutch what we have and

want more; but, instead, we gladly open our hands to share with others out of our abundance, and help others up and out of their physical and/or spiritual poverty.

I've come to believe that one of the reasons that most of us have joined Eden Church and stayed here is because we desire to be part of a moral community that both nurtures us spiritually and helps us deal more successfully with our needs, and that offers ways for us to reach out and share with others out of our spiritual abundance. I also believe that these aspirations are what draw most people into churches like ours. We do not have the corner on the market of community concerns as a church, but we do approach outreach ministry from a solid foundation.

III

This month Eden Church celebrates our 145th anniversary as a congregation. If you have read any of the history of Eden Church, or, better yet, if you have lived more than a few years of it, you know that Eden has had its ups and downs.

In 145 years Eden Church has survived two major earthquakes, the Great Depression, two world wars, the Japanese internment, the Vietnam Conflict, disagreements over the African-American, farm worker, and the lesbian and gay civil rights movements, dramatic population growth and major demographic changes. During these years, Eden has called 37 pastors who served less than three years, and only four who served a decade or more.¹

Despite all these ups and downs, what's most impressive about Eden Church—particularly in the past 50 years or so—has been the way that this congregation has brought individual gifts of time, talent, and treasure, and the collective generosity of our members, and the gift of our campus facilities to the care of the congregation and wider community.

During and after WWII, for example, Eden leaders taught in the Japanese Internment Camps, and spent their lives trying to remediate for the privations and prejudices that their students endured, particularly during the war years.

In the mid-1960s, the deacons of Eden Church sent one of our pastors to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.²

Later that same decade, one of our pastors and some of the men in our congregation, including a local lawyer, helped found Josephine Lum Lodge, the first in a series of affordable housing complexes for seniors, which is now part of Eden Housing in Hayward and which is still considered an exemplary affordable housing corporation.³

¹ See Esther McStay, *A Century at Eden* and Eleanor Sekerak, *Eden United Church of Christ: A Short History of the Last Twenty-Five Years* addenda for a complete roster of pastors.

² Per Eleanor Norberg, and Eleanor Sekerak, p. 25.

³ <http://www.edenhousing.org/edenhousing.asp?Page=91&PropertyID=71>

These and other Eden lay leaders were also part of founding the Hayward Salvation Army, and for many years participated in the Salvation Army food drives and holiday ingathering of cash donations.⁴

Eden leaders also helped sponsor the chaplain program at the Alameda County Juvenile Hall, and in addition to contributing to the chaplain's salary, they helped with monthly birthday parties, sewing and mending projects, Christmas cookies, and magazines.⁵

In the 1960s through the 1980s, Eden Church members helped resettle Vietnamese, Taiwanese, and Burmese refugees in the East Bay by providing food, furniture, clothing, and household items.⁶

In the early 1970s, one of our pastors protested the Vietnam War, and some draft cards were burned here at church, while others stood solidly and singularly behind those who accepted conscription.⁷

A bit deeper into the 1970s another of our pastors joined César Chavez in the farm worker movement, which was mostly supported by the congregation, but which got some mixed reviews among the membership.⁸

The 1980s were marked by lots of community involvement in the Peace Movement.⁹

In the mid-1990s, my predecessor led the congregation through the Open and Affirming process. Eden was one of the first 300 congregations in the United Church of Christ to declare itself an Open and Affirming church. Last month, we celebrated our 15th anniversary of being an ONA congregation.¹⁰

Around the turn of the millennium, Eden also helped found Congregations Organizing for Renewal, an faith-based community organizing group which is now associated with PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing).¹¹

Over the past fifty years, Eden Church has also hosted blood banks, offered free health education, and reached out and supported Fairmont Hospital and Highland Hospital patients with direct aid.¹²

⁴ Per Harold Medford, Bob Peterson, Cal Rule, and Karl Schultz.

⁵ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 24.

⁶ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 23.

⁷ Per 2002 pastoral profile and Search Committee.

⁸ Per 2002 Search Committee, and Barbara Lateer.

⁹ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 25.

¹⁰ <http://www.uccoalition.org/programs/ona/who/list/#CA>

¹¹ Per the Rev. Lydia Ferranti-Roseberry.

¹² Eleanor Sekerak, p. 23.

Our members have engaged in voter registration and education campaigns, and Eden has served as a polling station.¹³

We've hosted free cooking classes for families on a budget. We've served as a distribution site for federal commodities and food pantries, and as a place where Red Cross and Church World Service disaster kits were assembled and shipped out.¹⁴

Eden Church, the Eden Area Foundation, and Eden members have contributed substantially to the ministry of FESCO over the years, and have for the past four years provide FESCO with below-market rental space for their administrative offices.

We have also helped fund the SF Night Ministry, an outreach to drug addicts, sex workers, and the profoundly poor who live in the San Francisco Tenderloin neighborhood.¹⁵

But that is not all. Eden has been involved in the interfaith and ecumenical movement since the 1940s, and anyone who thinks that our collaborations with the Roman Catholic parishes and Jewish congregations are a new idea needs to read Eleanor Sekerak's *A Short History of Eden United Church of Christ, 1965-1990*.¹⁶

The practice of providing below-market rent and free meeting space to charities is a well-honed tradition at Eden. In the past 50 years, approximately 50 non-profit organizations have gotten their start or made their home with us. These groups include such far-ranging ministries as follows: Alcoholics Anonymous, a Cal-Berkley class on crime prevention, the Hayward Area Historical Society, a scout trip for boys with developmental delays, the local Audubon Society, and a secular women's group that founded a feminist bookstore in downtown Hayward.¹⁷

Quite possibly the most important hospitality Eden Church has provided over the years has been for the four African-American congregations who got their start here, at least two of which were turned away by every other church that they contacted in town. These four congregations included: Palma Ceia Baptist, Victory Outreach of Hayward, Glad Tidings Church of God in Christ—all of which out grew our space—and Refuge Baptist, which is still with us, worshipping in Pioneer Chapel on Sunday afternoons.¹⁸

¹³ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 22.

¹⁴ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 24.

¹⁵ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 24.

¹⁶ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 22.

¹⁷ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 22,

¹⁸ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 12, and conversations with Pastor Jim Candys, Refuge Baptist Church.

Eden has also helped found three UCC congregations: one in Danville, another in South Hayward, and a third here on our own campus, which was an outreach to Samoan immigrants.¹⁹ Eden Church also hosted the Hayward Area Society of Friends, and the Greek Orthodox Church of the Resurrection, the latter of which has relocated to Castro Valley.²⁰

If you ask around town what people know about Eden Church—as we did in our marketing study—you will find that those who recognize our name will say, “That’s the rich church!” or “That’s the church that got all the money.”²¹ Such comments are typically in reference to the gift that Eden received from the estates of Alden and Gordon Oliver, which made possible the renovation of our campus and the establishment of our small foundation, which benefits the church and the community.

Eden was blessed to receive these gifts. Without them, our circumstances would be very different today, and our capacity to serve our members and this community would be profoundly compromised. And yet, today’s gospel reading serves as a significant reminder that if we are rich—it is not the Oliver bequest that has made us rich. It is the abundant grace of God, which has given us the spiritual resources to continue what one of our former pastors described as, “...a long and honored history of being a church that is liberal in spirit, concerned about community affairs, cooperative in its attitudes, alert to new things, [and] willing to take a stand on significant contemporary issues.”²²

This brief review of Eden’s modern involvement in social ministry and Eleanor’s quote from a former pastor are reminders of ways that our forebears avoided the seduction of materialism and greed, and that helped them—and that may help us—understand that what makes us rich is God’s grace, which is far more abundant than we could ever ask for or comprehend. And that when we live our lives grounded in God’s grace and experience God’s abundance, we can pass on these riches to future generations, and give our neighbors a hand up and out of whatever privations that may be keeping them from the more abundant life that God has in store for all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁹ Esther McStay, p. 46.

²⁰ Eleanor Sekerak, p. 12.

²¹ Eden’s marketing study was conducted in conjunction with the implementation of the 2003-2007 Strategic Plan.

²² Eleanor Sekerak, p. 22.