

Bigger Barns or Bigger Hearts?
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Episcopal Church
Pentecost 10, Proper 13, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary
August 5, 2007

Money.

We spend hours working to acquire it, and hours planning how to spend it or invest it. Its influence over us and our culture is insidious: every new Wall Street report, complete with how the economy is doing and whether the stock indices are up or down, can shift the mood of a whole country. We spend more time talking about it than anything else—what we do if we had more money, how much money we spent on our latest vacation, or house, or car; how the government wastes our hard-earned money. As a people, we are seemingly always looking for more money—and if you doubt me, just look at the success of the lotteries, raffles, and casinos that entice us by dangling the chance of riches in front of us.

Jesus spent a lot of time preaching and teaching about money, and our relationship with it. He was aware of its hold on our lives, even if we are not. He often chided the wealthy and powerful, and used the rich as a warning sign in his parables. And yet, for all this, Jesus did not despise money or wealth, or even those that possessed it. What he did despise was the extent to which we let money rule our lives and influence our relationships with others—and God.

This message is the heart of today's gospel. The rich man of our Gospel story was not evil, and most likely was not even dishonest. Whether this bountiful harvest came about from his skill or from sheer luck is not known, nor is it important to know. What is important to know, however, is how the rich man managed his good fortune.

His first reaction was almost one of dismay—here he had so much, and no place to store it all. What to do with the excess? Aha, he thought, no problem; let's just build bigger storage! The idea alone seemed to fill him with great satisfaction—for not only would enjoy this bumper crop for this year, but for years to come. And now that he had gone from being merely rich to

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being wildly wealthy, he could sit back and enjoy life all the more; a self-made man, living off his hard-earned abundance.

And therein lies the irony—a self-made man. How many of us can truly and honestly say that? Yet we are very fond of that ideal in this country—we never tire of hearing the stories of how some struggling kid from a poor neighborhood worked hard against all odds and wound up living the good life. But the plain truth is that everything in our lives, including our life itself, is a gift from God. And God gives many gifts: the air we breathe, the food we eat, our health, our friends and families, even the fruits of our labors—all of these and more are poured out of God’s great abundance. For all of this, we give God thanks.

Unfortunately for our rich man, he forgot about giving thanks. Thanksgiving is an important factor in our relationship to God. It has been said that “Thank you” is the best prayer that God receives. When we give thanks, we remember that we are the receivers, not the givers; we are in need and not in control. We are dependent children of a loving God. When we fail to remember that, we start down the road of pride; we make the error of thinking that we actually earned all that we have been given, and therefore, are self-sufficient and not in need of anyone—even God.

The gifts we have been given, however, are not ours alone to do with as we will. They are meant to be shared. We are stewards of God’s good creation, of God’s gifts, not owners. With open hearts and hands we receive, and if we remain open, it is easy to give. The trouble comes when we close ourselves up—holding fast to God’s bounty, disconnecting ourselves from the community around us. We covet and stockpile and create dividing lines—this is mine, that is

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yours. Deep inside each of us lies a little bit of Scrooge, and if we are not careful, we can forge our own set of chains as well.

Our rich man added many links to his chain that day—for here he was, blessed with this abundant harvest, and he kept it all to himself. It was not as if he thought of donating some of it and then decided against it (which wouldn't be great either)—the fact is that **THE THOUGHT NEVER EVEN OCCURRED TO HIM**. His crop was so large he didn't have barns to hold it all, and yet, the only thing he could think of was to build bigger barns. Sharing his good fortune with the poor and the hungry didn't even register on his radar screen. It is this lack of community based thinking that makes the world the dangerous place that it is. Violence, war, racism, elitism, sexism—all that divides us and pits us against one another—all spring from this lack of community. We forget to whom we belong—and we forget that, as the body of Christ, we belong to each other. We are to care for one another, for none of us is whole and complete unless we all are.

Deep down, we know all this. So why then do we hold onto our possessions, our money, so tightly? Why do we become so attached to that which we know is so temporary? I will admit to having a houseful of 'treasured' objects—family heirlooms, small crafts that my girls made for me in school or Girl Scouts, a collection of teapots. None of these things are important by themselves—but somehow I've managed to emotionally invest in them. I think it would be safe to say that I am not the only one. But when we invest ourselves in our things, we open the door to having them define us, to have control over us—instead of investing ourselves in God and God's dream for a loving world.

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Interestingly enough, a direct translation of the original biblical text points to just that fact. For instead of “This very night your life is being demanded of you”, the original Greek reads “In this night your soul they demand of you” in which the ‘they’ seems to refer back to the man’s goods. By investing so much of himself and his future—indeed, his salvation—in his wealth, our rich farmer has allowed it to rule over him. He has cast all his eggs into one basket—the wrong basket—for wealth, our stuff, cannot save us from death.

But there is One who can—and has. Jesus gave his life willingly, lovingly, so that you and I may live a life of freedom, of openness, of trust in God’s never ending love and care. The love that created us and sustains us calls us, implores us, to live out that love in the world by sharing ourselves and our gifts with others. Just as God our Father shared God’s son with us, so we too are asked to give as well, making God’s priorities our priorities.

In my former life as an accountant, I handled many a checkbook, many a tax return. One thing I learned very quickly is that there are perhaps few things in our society more revealing of one’s values and priorities than what one does with their money. What, then, does your checkbook say about you? Whose priorities do you see reflected there?

May we always remember with free and thankful hearts to make God’s Kingdom our priority—instead of bigger barns. Amen.