

“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” That is the reason that Jesus gives for refusing to adjudicate a dispute between two brothers about the family inheritance. “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The brothers must be disputing because they think the inheritance will give them more or less life, but Jesus says otherwise, and then he tells them the parable of the rich farmer whose fields produced so abundantly that he decided to build a bigger barn to keep the harvest in, but who died that night before he could benefit from his wealth.

Why do people think that life does consist in the abundance of possessions? Well, let’s see. Wealth offers us a good measure of security in a harsh world—you can be assured of shelter, medical care, and some comforts if you have money. It allows us to take care of our children, and it allows us to provide for our old age so that our children won’t have to. Wealth offers us choices—you don’t have to eat rice and beans every day if you have enough money to buy meat. Wealth makes possible certain kinds of fun: a tropical escape in February, a weekend of theater in a big city, dinner out for no special reason. Wealth allows us to dress well and command respect. Sounds pretty good to me, and as your pastor, how can I not want those things for you?

I do want those things for you, and for myself too. But as the rich farmer shows us, having wealth gives us the *illusion* of control over our lives, not the real thing—when he has to die, all that grain won’t do him any good. Jesus characterizes him as having failed to be “rich toward God.” Rich toward God. What’s that?

God doesn’t need our money. God is already rich. And certainly it is right and necessary for us to share our wealth with those who have less, simply because they are our sisters and brothers—but “rich toward God” means more than adding a charity line item into the household

budget. It means replacing the confidence we have in possessions with confidence in God. And that's where it gets complicated.

Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage in *The Message* says, "What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving. . . . Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions." Jesus wants to clear the way for us to receive *greater* blessings and joy than possessions can give us, and to do that you have to reframe your perspective so you are focused on all that God gives already.

David Rensburger, a Mennonite teacher, says, "Jesus does not command us to quit worrying so that we may find God, nor does he say that the necessities of life come automatically to those who avoid thinking about them. . . . He says that *when* we focus on God, *then* we can and will quit worrying." Living without preoccupation with possessions is not a starting point but a result of commitment entirely to God. And that commitment is not a drain on what we have but the source of what we have *and* of what we will need.

Rensburger says that in 1971, with a young wife and a baby, he went to prison rather than cooperate with the US Selective Service, which was processing young men to serve in the Vietnam War.

All the ins and outs of that decision are too long a story to tell here; it is enough to say that I knew it was God's will and God's calling. In prison I worked in the library, and one day there I found a scholarly edition of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls—Hebrew text, technical commentary, and all. Now I ask you, what was that book doing in the library? To this day it seems to me that it must have been put there for me to find. I was deeply interested in the Bible, and I'd always been interested in languages and history, and . . . well, I had time on my hands. I began trying to learn Hebrew using this book, and then a pastor friend of our family helped me start studying Hebrew by correspondence . . . it was the start of a career in biblical studies that took up the next 35 years of my life.

Rensburger made a commitment to God's way in a very specific form when his

conscience would not allow him to cooperate with the Selective Service. That commitment had painful consequences, but it also put him on the staging ground where God could give him what really nourished him--a career in something he loved, a career that met the needs of his family. It was serendipitous; it was just what he needed; it was not the place where he would have ended up if he had thought that life consists in the abundance of possessions. Jesus is trying to clear the way for us to receive *greater* blessings and joy than possessions can give us.

Tom and I are reading a book by Richard Rohr called *The Naked Now*, the subtitle of which is "Learning to See as the Mystics See." I want to see as the mystics see, because they see truth and it makes them happy. Mystics live in the kingdom of God right now, and I want that. So we're reading this book, and I get it, mostly. Richard Rohr says that authentically experienced Christianity is *the overcoming of the split between us and God*, the overcoming of a dualistic perception of the universe in which some things are holy and some things are not, in which God is in some places and God is not in other places. In his discussion of faith development, he says that immature religious faith is usually pre-rational; in a sense it's magical, and it collapses when the rational mind matures enough to challenge its supernatural assumptions. "To stay too long in infantile religion leaves you vulnerable to being easily scandalized, prone to oppositional thinking, defensive, and generally unable to be inclusive, conversational, and respectful with those outside your small circle."

The danger in what I've said so far about the parable of the rich man is that for the pre-rational believer, this all falls too neatly into a scheme in which you do hard, pious, self-denying stuff and when you die God rewards you with a trip to heaven. The rational mind can see that this is works-righteousness, a way of trying to save yourself from yourself. Perhaps it is even a way of establishing your superiority over others, a self-deception that compensates for pain you

don't want to examine.

I don't want to support magical thinking or any kind of crutch that prevents us being honest. I want to speak to our *trans-rational* minds, the ones that have gone through the darkness after naïveté and have a different level of awareness, a sense, however vague or fleeting, that God is present in everything all the time and everything is holy now.

I want to talk about the parable of the rich man not as an opposition between wealth and holiness, or flesh and spirit, or self-interest and selflessness, but as an assertion that the universe is ultimately a good and generous place. The parable of the rich man is an assertion that the universe is ultimately a good and generous place. As long as we think of wealth as an alternative to God—perhaps a more reliable alternative, perhaps a devilishly tempting evil alternative—we miss the joy of the mystic vision in which everything is holy now. What if the rich man had been a mystic? Then he would have seen the bountiful harvest as a gift from God, and a number of happy choices would have opened up to him. He could have given a huge party and invited the whole village over to share the wealth. He could have started a new bakery with all the extra grain and created jobs. He could have used the extra grain as seed to experiment with new, greener agricultural methods. Even if his life was required of him that night, his mystical vision and way of living would already have so transformed the community around him that they would have taken the grain and made those same choices, plus holding up his memory as a beloved example for the village children to emulate. Whatever happened would have been joyful and surprising, two of the signs of God acting.

Paul says that we are being clothed with the new self, renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there are no longer meaningful distinctions between people—Greek and Jew, slave and free, insiders and outsiders, children of God and orphans of

God—Christ is all and in all. I really think that's what the parable of the rich farmer is saying too: we are all in this together; God is in it with us; act like you believe it and see how God can surprise us!