

Ownership by possessions is likely to be harmful

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Pentecost + 8C – Hosea 11.1-11, Psalm 107.1-9, 43, Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

When you want to see someone get a message across, nobody does it quite like Jesus. His little parable of the rich fool is a stunner. Like all Jesus' parables, you have to keep its setting in mind if you want to sense its original impact. There's a huge crowd gathered around Jesus as he teaches his disciples about being honest, about how much God loves them, about how God will honour their courageous witness, and about the terrible dangers they'll face as they proclaim the gospel.

Just as he's telling them how the Holy Spirit will help them when they're on trial for their lives, a man in surrounding the crowd interjects: 'Teacher!' Now what's he going to say? Does he want to ask if he can join the disciples? Is he going to say that he wants be a part of restoring the hearts of a whole nation to the one true God? Nope. Teacher, tell my big brother to divide the family inheritance with me.

He hasn't heard Jesus, has he? He's just been waiting to speak; to ask the Rabbi to wave a big stick at his brother. He doesn't connect with the teaching he interrupts. He wants financial independence. Being financially self-sufficient is a very modern concern. Being self-sufficient, self-reliant, you don't need to rely on anybody else. You're beholden to no one. But once you're self-sufficient, you find you have to give lots of energy to staying that way. So you hang onto stuff – just in case.

In the Mediterranean world of Jesus time – and it's the same there today – this is tantamount to a death wish. Pull out of

the give and take of community, and you don't exist. It's the same thing Hosea warned against; it's what Paul taught about. Don't turn your back on the source of your life; it's a form of suicide. To choose selfishness makes you less than human. To be a true human being – someone who truly reflects our making in the image of God – our life has to connect with the generosity and commitment to community that we see in God. That's a powerful message this wonderful parable teaches. We'll look at just some of the details.

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. So he's already rich and now he's become richer still. How should he respond? Should he thank God for this unexpected abundance? Should he invite his workers in and share this bonus with them – say thanks for all the hard work they must have done? Does he wonder if the other people in the village haven't been as lucky as him? Should he check to see whether anyone needs his help?

Nope. He doesn't talk to anyone else. In fact, there's nobody else in this lonely parable. When the rich fool does speak, it's only to himself.

'Self', he says, 'self, "what should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" "This speech isn't just sad, it's pitiful. This wealthy, self-confident man has arrived; he's made it. He needs an audience for his arrival speech. But who's there? Family? Friends? Servants and their families? Village elders? Fellow landowners? ... The gregarious Middle Easterner always has a community around them. But this man? He can only address himself." Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 66

The issue is not ownership of possessions but ownership by possessions. There's a word that pops up in both of today's New Testament readings – greed pleonexia – the desire of gaining more and more. In our Colossians reading greed – pleonexia – is defined as idolatry. This desire for gaining and keeping more and more pushes God out of the way. In the

sense that it replaces God with wealth, it's an idol.

On the internet, in magazines and on TV, pleonexia is pushed as a way of life. It's our central economic principle; growth or death. So every advertisement sells us an image of ourselves with more. In the parable, pleonexia has bumped God out of the way, and the man deludes himself that he's found the secret to security in stuff.

This is a theme that's central to Luke's Gospel from here on. Nothing is more destructive of meaningful life in human community than the preoccupation with acquiring, holding on to, and enhancing riches. It's not so much the wealth as such, as our tendency to look to it for our security. The more we find our security in wealth, the harder it is to find our true security in each other and in God.

And there's the paradox – the call to be rich towards God is a call to give it away; to give it to God; to give it to others for God. We are God's people, so we're called to work with God to make sure everyone who needs God's grace knows God's grace – no means tests; no productivity indicators to check whether the grace will be used efficiently. Just grace in community.

The only qualification required to become eligible for God's love is need. And we are all bottomless pits of need for love, aren't we.

Talking about today's parable, St Ambrose answered the rich man's first worried question about storage. He said that the rich man already had storage available; in the mouths of the needy. Amen