

“Whose Will They Be?”
The Rev. Dr. Brandon Perrine

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But 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?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

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One day, a young woman asked a wealthy older man how he had made his fortune. The older man fingered his worsted wool vest and said, “Well, young lady, it was 1932. The depth of the Great Depression. I was down to my last nickel. I invested that nickel in an apple. I spent the entire day polishing the apple and, at the end of the day, I sold the apple for ten cents. The next morning, I invested those ten cents in two apples. I spent the entire day polishing them and sold them at 5:00 pm for 20 cents. I continued this system for a month, by the end of which I'd accumulated a

fortune of \$1.37.” “And that's how you built an empire?" the young woman asked. “Heavens, no!” the older man replied. “Then my wife's father died and left us two million dollars.”

I suppose that it would be nice to be the recipient of such an inheritance, wouldn't it? How many of us, with \$1.37 in our pockets, would decline a two-million-dollar bequest? None of us! We're no fools. Chances are, we'd pop open a bottle of champagne or go out for a nice dinner and start planning how we'd spend that money instead.

It's interesting, I think, the way some folks decide to divvy up their wealth. Complex wills and advanced legal planning help to ensure that their wishes for their wealth are carried out to a T. Consider this example:

Leona Helmsley left behind an unusual will after her death in 2007. The billionaire New York City real estate developer and hotel magnate had amassed a fortune estimated to be somewhere between \$5 billion and \$8 billion, according to *The New York Times*. In her will, she requested that the majority of this money be given to charity, including animal welfare programs, and gave other, smaller amounts to various relatives. Most shockingly, Helmsley left \$12 million to her 8-year-old dog, Trouble, but no money for two of her grandchildren, directly specifying in her will that she had “not made any provisions in this Will for my grandson . . . or my granddaughter . . . for reasons which are known to them.” At the time that this news was announced, there were so many death threats against the dog that it began requiring \$100,000 worth of security each year.¹

It's interesting, I think, the way some folks decide to divvy up their wealth. Our reading from Luke's gospel begins with two brothers arguing over their inheritance. Apparently, adequate legal provisions had not been taken by the deceased and the division of wealth required further

¹ Douglas McIntyre. “The 10 Most Infamous Family Inheritance Feuds,” Aol.com, June 6, 2016: <https://www.aol.com/2011/06/06/the-10-most-infamous-family-inheritance-feuds/>.

clarification. They brought their quandary to Jesus and he responded, as he so often did, by telling a parable about a rich fool. Now, let me be clear, it wasn't his wealth that made him a fool. Jesus painted him a fool for his self-centered greed.

Jesus stated that the fields of this man produced abundantly. Now it stands to reason that this abundance was the result of immense toil on the part of a great many workers and yet the rich fool thought only of himself. "What should I do," he pondered, "for I have no place to store my crops?" Again, the man talked only to himself about himself before concluding, "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.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

His solution, pulling down his existing barns and building bigger ones would surely again require the efforts of many workers, but the rewards were only to be enjoyed by the rich fool himself. And then in a literary move uncommon to Jesus' parables, the voice of God cut into the dialogue, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Indeed, whose *will* they be?

In a second lectionary text for today from the book of Ecclesiastes, the teacher posed a similar question. "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun," they bemoaned, "seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun."² Whose will they be?

For me, these texts speak two profoundly important messages for us in 21st century America. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is this: a life lived in the single-minded personal pursuit of material wealth, misses the point of life itself.

² Ecclesiastes 2:18-19, NRSV.

The second, and perhaps subtler point, comes in the form of a question asked by God in the Lukan text itself: “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” When all is said and done and our own lives are no more, who will inherit all that we have spent our life pursuing—whose will they be? For many, it will be a partner, children or grandchildren. For others it will be a church, educational institution, or charity. In either case, though, it is people or a cause we care about that will receive what we leave behind.

And so, I think it’s worth asking what bequest—what legacy would we like to leave them? Will it be the gift of memories—of time well spent, of love shared, and life lived fully and well? Will it be the gift of values—of hard-learned lessons that shaped who we became and will continue shaping future generations? Will it be the gift of dreams—our highest hopes and our best wishes finally realized in the lives of those who come after us? Or will our bequest, our legacy, be a broken democracy, a scarred and struggling planet, senseless violence among neighbors, and a climate of fear—fear of others, fear of scarcity, fear for the future? It really matters what we leave behind because the people we leave it to really do matter.

In contrast to Jesus’ parable of the rich and foolish farmer, this story is shared about the Marquis de Lafayette, who helped the American colonists during the War of Independence from Britain in the 18th century:

When he returned home to France, [the Marquis] lived on his big estates and did very well. He was in the same social class as the rich man in Jesus’ parable, but acted very differently. In 1783, after a poor harvest, Lafayette’s workers were still able to fill his barns with wheat. “The bad harvest has raised the price of wheat,” said one of his workers. “This is the time to sell.” Lafayette thought about the hungry peasants in the surrounding villages. “No,” he replied, “this is the time to give.”³

³ Kate Matthews. “Loving God Back,” Ucc.org, August 4, 2019: https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/weekly_seeds_loving_god_back/.

A life lived in the single-minded personal pursuit of material wealth, misses the point of life itself. When all is said and done and our lives are no more, all that we have worked for—whose will they be, who will inherit them? And what exactly will we be leaving for them to inherit?

May ours be lives lived fully and well and may our legacy be of a world made better for those who will inherit it from us. May it be so. Amen.
