

Luke 12:13-21 Hosea 11:1-11 "Sorting Out Our Stuff" August 4, 2013

From ABC News this week, 7-2013: "If you had investments worth a million dollars, would you consider yourself rich? How about \$5 million? Well, hold on to your wallet because a new study has found that the majority of millionaires don't consider themselves rich. According to a study from the investment bank UBS, entitled "What is Wealthy?," 40 percent of those with \$5 million in investable assets said they didn't feel that they were rich. And only 28 percent of investors who had between \$1 and \$5 million in investable assets viewed themselves as rich." (Seen on Yahoo.com)

So money may not make a person feel "rich." This is a bit surprising to hear, especially for those whose assets may not make it to a mere million. Our commercials, our newspapers, have usually praised people able to "make it big," who have large salaries or long contracts or who acquire fancy cars and large houses. For years, it seemed that "The one who dies with the most toys wins," but in honesty, the one who dies with the most toys still *dies*. Having lots of stuff is no guarantee of happiness or a well-lived life. When we choose "stuff" over living closely with God, we lose. The Bible wants to make sure we hear this message, because God loves us and wants what is best for us.

In the reading from Hosea, God's disappointment with God's children, Israel, is poignantly spelled out: "When Israel was a child, I carried him....loved him.... But then Israel- the people - turned their back on me, and worshiped other gods.... my anger would explode...but I will not destroy my child...I will some day bring my child home..." (Loose paraphrase of Hos. 11)

The pain of a parent is something most of us who are parents can touch... even those of us who are not parents can touch it from the other side... How many of us had a time when we turned our backs on our parents, letting them down, disobeying or ignoring them? "When Israel was a child, I carried him..." God has allowed himself to be as vulnerable to us as a parent...

The Gospel lesson offers that disturbing story told by Jesus of the man who had been incredibly successful in his work, stuffing his barn so full of crops that he had to build a larger one, and then another.... Did you notice what prompted Jesus to tell this story? A man approached Jesus and asked him to help with the dispute he and his brother were having about their inheritance.

Money, stuff, crops, wills... There is much potential for pain here. Two brothers, arguing over the will. In Jesus' day, to even HAVE an inheritance indicated a fair degree of affluence. There was enough stuff to cause tension. The man did not run up to ask Jesus for help in dealing with the grief he felt over the loss of his father or even with his relationship with his brother; he wanted Jesus to help make sure he got his share of his father's stuff. Jesus, if you noticed, would have no part of that. Instead, Jesus told a story about a man most people today would find impressive. His profit line was out of sight, and he was extremely satisfied with himself and the fortune he was amassing for his retirement.

But in Jesus' story, this man never got to retirement. That very night, an angel came to him and

informed him that he was fool, not a wise man, and that his life-time was up. Over. The only thing the man was remembered for was all his “stuff,” and similarly, the brothers who were more caught up in who would get what than in the loss of their father evidently didn’t learn much more from their parents than the love of “stuff.” Possessions ruled, and there seemed to be room for little else.

The message? Make money, if you are so blessed to be able to do so, but don’t lose sight of what is REALLY important in life. What is important? Your relationship with God, and your relationship with other people. Your compassion, what makes you laugh, the good you do with what you have.... Everything else will finally pass away.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him...” All through the Bible, God declares God’s love for us and God’s hope that we will finally realize that we were made to love God. We cannot “DO” life on our own for very long... Even if you ace school and get a hot-shot job and marry and have great kids and a faithful spouse and are able to buy one of the fanciest houses in the town where you live, and you have friends and a positive outlook on life and everybody thinks you’re a model citizen and you’re elected president of every organization you join and make CEO and finally retire in absolute comfort at the age of 55 without even stubbing your toe or getting a speeding ticket, you need God. All of us, no matter how well we negotiate the paths of life, have mixed motives, hidden fears, and the need for forgiveness. All of us, no matter how healthy and blessed we are, will some day find that life fails us because of disease or accident or old age. We CANNOT do life on our own; we were not made to live without a life-giving source beyond ourselves: we find our true life and forever riches in our relationship with God.

Israel turned its back on God and instead trusted in military alliances with other countries. The people said prayers to the Canaanite gods of fertility as they planted their crops, because their neighbors’ crops seemed to grow better...Instead of trusting God and being faithful to God as God had commanded them, they chose what seemed to produce results, whatever seemed to produce more “stuff.”

In Jesus’ story the man is both rich and has many lands. In fact, he’s so rich that he can tear down his old barns and build new ones, not just fill up the old ones and then build additional storage. He’s rich. But did you notice his words? “What shall I do... I will do ...and I will... and there I will... And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods paid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” He was talking to himself, about himself, for himself only. No other people, and no God. God’s response to this man who thought himself to be smart: “Fool! This very night your soul is required of you...” Foolish is whoever lays up treasure for himself, and is not “rich toward God.” (Pause)

Preacher Sally Brown told of a time when she witnessed a couple who were totally different: “As a young teenager, I was keenly image-conscious, and I could be critical of those who weren’t. One Sunday evening our family got into the car and went to pick up a certain Mrs. C for the evening church service. She lived in a tiny house in an unpretentious part of town. Her husband, a top executive at a large corporation, had driven their only car to an out-of-town

business meeting. Why didn't they have two cars so Mrs. C could drive herself to church, I wanted to know? Why didn't they live in a better house? And while we were on the subject, why did Mr. C always look as though he was wearing the same old suit? My father explained that, without fanfare but with great consistency, Mr. and Mrs. C lived this way as a matter of principle. They chose to give away 90% of their income and to live on the remaining ten percent. Back then, I was impressed with the numbers, the grandeur of the gesture. Now, at midlife, I am impressed with the integrity of such a life, and the depth of trust in divine goodness that makes such a life possible." (*Word and Witness, August, 1998*)

No matter how much or how little you have, don't let "stuff" be your god, and don't let your desire for stuff rule your life. God is already our God; we have no need and no place for any other. And remember that at any moment, your life may be demanded of you. "Those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God are fools," Jesus warns.

A story tells of a rich man who stopped to visit a wise teacher in his hut. The man was astonished to see that such a famous teacher had only a wood table, some simple chairs, and a few books in his main room. "Teacher," the man asked, "where is your furniture?" The teacher replied, "I might ask the same question of you." "I have no furniture because I am simply a traveller. I am just passing through," the man said. The Teacher smiled, "So am I." (Original source unknown)

Crisis or no crisis, we are all just passing through. Whether we have a fair amount of stuff or wonder where we will sleep tonight, and even if we live to be 95 or 100 years old, we remain on earth a short time. But we belong to God for all time. So let us be smart in our living. Let us ask God to show us what is really important in our lives. And let us remember who we are: children of the Living God, called to serve only one master: this One who has given us life, who asks us to love each other, and who will continue to LIFE us today and even beyond death. As we declared in our call to worship: "In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone!" Thanks be to God! Amen.