

“Asking the Right Question”

Rev. Stephen Michie Huguenot Memorial Presbyterian Church
Pelham Manor, NY March 2, 2014

I Peter 4:7-11

Luke 12:13-31

Text: “*And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’*” Luke 12:17

There are people we meet in the Bible with whom it is not easy to identify. In almost every case a connection emerges, but it’s not always immediately apparent. One thinks of John the Baptist, for instance, wearing a scratchy camel hair shirt, referring to those who came to hear him out in the wilderness as a “*brood of vipers.*” The same is true for the poor widow whom Jesus commended because, when the offering plate was passed, she put in her last penny. None of us, especially in this part of Westchester County, is that poor – and none of us is that generous.

And how about the farmer in this parable whose lands produced a miraculous harvest? I feel an immediate connection. I spent a good part of my youth growing up in the flat farm country of central Illinois, and we visited our grandparents often, who lived amid the cotton farms of southeast Missouri. In those places I learned to appreciate the precarious nature of farm life, when a drought, or an unseasonable frost, or too much rain at the wrong time would ruin a crop and make for a lean winter. Conversely, the year when everything clicks and there’s a bountiful harvest is cause for grateful celebration. Farm families then must decide what to do with the greater-than-expected profits: buy a new tractor, or take a rare vacation, or put the money in the bank for a future bleak year. I can identify with the quandary of the farmer in this parable: What to do with this unanticipated wealth?

You may be someone who has little or no understanding for the difficulties – and the delights – of a farmer’s life. But even if you don’t know the first thing about agriculture, you may be better able to identify with this farmer than some of the other New Testament characters. To understand why, call to mind how the parable begins. “*The land of a rich man produced abundantly,*” writes Luke. Unlike many of the people about whom Jesus tells us, this guy isn’t a “marginal person.” He’s one of the privileged people of his time.

The word in Greek which Luke used to describe his land is not “*agros*” – a simple field – but “*chora*,” which suggests something the size of a district or region. We are not dealing here with the proverbial tenant farmer on a small plot of ground, but someone with vast holdings. So we should think of this man as the CEO of a huge and successful agri-business. In other words, he is someone rather like us, we who are citizens of the richest and most powerful nation on earth. Despite all of our problems, compared with so many others in the world, our way of life is incredibly comfortable, far safer, and more secure than most. I don’t mean that as an indictment, just as a statement of reality. As privileged Christians, we have to struggle with the duties of those who have worldly advantages, while many others face the challenge of living with limited resources.

I really don’t know which is more difficult. On a purely physical basis, the answer is easy. It’s considerably easier living where we do than in Afghanistan, say, or North Korea, or some remote village in Syria – but spiritually? Those whose daily lives are less secure may more readily acknowledge their dependence on God, and feel more deeply their gratitude for any tangible evidence of God’s grace. We who live in this society, on the other hand, may be in danger of something about which Jesus cautioned the well-off in his day: gaining the whole world, and losing our souls.

Most scholars agree that Luke was writing for people like you and me, since the Christian community he was addressing was relatively prosperous. Furthermore, the Jesus we meet in Luke has far more to say about money and material things in general, than the other Gospels. Luke seems to have sensed that for the members of his community, their faithfulness – or lack thereof – would depend a great

deal on what they did with their privileges. It also could be the reason why this particular parable is recorded only by Luke.

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What prompted the parable was a request that Jesus intervene in a family squabble. He refused to act as a referee, perhaps because regulations for resolving such matters were well-known, but also because getting involved in such a dispute would have diverted him from his greater purposes. So Jesus used the occasion to issue a warning: *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kind of greed;”* he declared, *“for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”*

In a nutshell, the parable describes the choices when a prosperous farmer enjoys a miraculous harvest so great that his barns cannot contain it. What to do? After pondering the matter, he decides to tear down the old barns and build new ones, believing that finally he “has it made.” Retirement will be good – plenty of time for golf, tennis and fishing, and more than enough money for cruises around the Mediterranean. But that very night the man has a heart attack, and dies. After the memorial service the neighbors ask, “How much did he have?” The answer, of course, is “everything” – he left it all.

What intrigues me is that sentence in the middle of the parable: *“He thought to himself, ‘What should I do?’”* It seems to me perfectly natural for the man to have asked that question – and what’s more, it’s not only a legitimate one, I believe it’s the right question. Suppose that tomorrow your “ship were to come in,” or you were fortunate enough to get a big bonus at year-end. Suppose, as sometimes happens, this church were to receive a large, unrestricted bequest. In that context, I would hope you would ask, and we would ask, “What should I (or we) do? To what use shall we put such dividends?”

Moreover, as the privileged people of our time, is this not the question which we ought regularly to ask? “I have all this education,” for example – “Ivy League college, graduate or professional degree: What should I do?” “I have this position of influence,” another might realize, as a respected teacher, or successful entrepreneur, or the president of a local service club, or as an experienced pastor: “What should I do?” Or, “Now that I’m retired, with time on my hands and plenty of energy: What should I do?”

There wasn’t, and isn’t, anything wrong with the question. The problem in the parable is with the man’s answer: it reveals that the only person he ever thought about was himself. Within just three verses, the first-person pronoun – either “I” or “my” – occurs 11 times. We don’t know if this farmer had a family, but if so, they don’t seem to have entered his head. We know that he had neighbors, but he doesn’t think about them. We can be sure that there were people around who were needy – but they aren’t part of this farmer’s calculations, either. And neither was God.

God was there as always, but the farmer did not think of God. *“You fool!”* a voice said to him, and I imagine this man quickly smacking his forehead and saying, “Oh no, I forgot about God!” But it was too late. The voice said, *“This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”* His wealth was no longer of any use to him – of what use could it be? That question was one about which the man had not thought.

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Because Luke’s Gospel is so concerned with the faithful use of possessions, Roman Catholic theologian Walter Burghardt has suggested that the “peril” of possessions is essentially two-fold. One danger is that our material goods will possess us – become the center of our existence. It doesn’t matter, Burghardt writes, “if it’s an adult’s million-dollar home, or a child’s Raggedy Ann doll; whether it’s the presidency or a pastorate, whether it’s profound knowledge or a touch of power, my law firm or my ad agency, my health or my wealth – whatever I ‘own.’” So one pitfall of possessions is that they can manipulate us, get a stranglehold on us – to the point where nothing else matters.

The other dangerous thing about our possessions, claims this theologian, is that they may isolate us. What we have is “ours,” and no one else gets near it. If our resources are great enough – again, not

just money, necessarily, but status, or talent, or power – we may begin to think that we are self-sufficient, that we don't need anybody else, and that we are without obligations: to others, or even to God! We see all of this in this prosperous farmer: “*What should I do...?*” he asks.

It's the right question for anyone to ask – and there's a way to answer it so that one won't end up looking like a fool in God's sight. But in this regard, we have an advantage over this wealthy farmer: we have, as he did not, explicit teaching on the Christian subject of how to employ our resources. We see it plainly in the 10th verse of I Peter's 4th Chapter: “*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.*” I hear Peter saying that there are several things to consider when you ask yourself (and I ask myself), “What should I do?”

The first is that you are a steward – you are the manager, but not the owner, of what you possess. From the Christian viewpoint, everything you have belongs to someone else, the “someone else” being God. You have the freedom and responsibility to manage your resources as a “sacred trust,” but you have to answer to Another for the way you do it. The farmer failed to understand that. Maybe he had an excuse, but we don't. Over what are you a steward? “...*the manifold grace of God,*” which, as Reformed Christians, we are commanded to share. Our greatest privilege, actually, as good stewards is to be channels through which God's goodness and generosity flow to others: providing the means whereby our children begin to experience divine love; or acting as the instruments which carry God's healing power to others. Please remember that when you ask yourself, “What should I do?”

And there is more: “*Like stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another...*” The rich farmer thought about none of this. He did not realize that he had the opportunity to serve others because of God's grace – that the wealth with which he had been entrusted implied social responsibilities, i.e. obligations to his neighbors. Because of his self-preoccupation, or due to his idolatrous mindset, this farmer mismanaged a miracle! That will not happen to us, if we are “good stewards.” When we ask, “What should I do?” we will think not only of ourselves but of persons who need us: the homeless and hungry, the poor and the sick, the 20% of children in this nation who live in poverty, and the education-deprived youth who too often see no future for themselves. We will think of whoever might be the troubled adolescents of our own congregation, but also, more broadly, about the struggling Christians living under repressive governments, or too many refugees in too many places.

Then our question will be “What shall I do to serve them?” And we'll be led to a further question: “How will I serve them?” Jesus answers: “...*with whatever gift each of you has received.*” Which brings us back to where we began. We are among the First World people on this earth in our time, and so we have received much and our “gifts” are many: not just money but intelligence and expertise, talent, positions of influence, and discretionary use of our time. Recalling all the “gifts” with which we've been blessed, we will also recall the words of Jesus: “*From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.*”

Our 2014 Stewardship Appeal is nearing its conclusion, thanks to the diligent work of Chairperson Jeff Marcks, his energetic committee, and the financial response of so many of you. If you haven't yet pledged, I hope that you will very soon, asking yourself the very same question the farmer asked. But try asking it this way: “Given the privileges I enjoy... given the evidence of God's manifold grace in my life ... given my Christian calling to be a ‘good steward,’ serving others with my gifts: What should I do?”