

Family Matters

Sermon 26 | Greystone Baptist Church | Aug 4, 2019

Luke 12: 13 - 31

“Mom! She’s touching me!” I cried out from the back seat of the minivan on numerous occasions. “She got to ride in the front seat last time!” “But dad, that’s not fair!” I know I’m not the only one who has raised my voice and shouted these words. I’d be willing to bet that to anyone in this room who has a sibling, or who has raised siblings, these words are all too familiar. Siblings are notorious for argument, competition, and flat out rivalry. In fact, Reader’s Digest published an article on the most infamous sibling rivalries. From the royal rivalry of Mary and Anne Boleyn, to the epic matches between Venus and Serena Williams, from Jim and John Harbaugh to Peyton and Eli Manning... our past and our present are full of stories about siblings who love to compete and triumph over one another.¹

The Reader’s Digest article (in this case) could have come straight out of the Bible. From Genesis accounts of Cain and Able, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and, well the other 11 brothers, siblings in our sacred texts never seem to get along. Our scriptures are wrought with stories about stolen birthrights and squandered inheritance. In Luke’s Gospel we find Jesus invited to arbitrate between sisters Mary and Martha. We read the Parable of the Prodigal Son; and in today’s reading, Jesus is asked to intervene in a family matter and divide an inheritance amongst brothers.

The question and the parable that follows remind me of the car my parents bought when I turned 15. It was a white, 1991 Lincoln Mark 7 with a v8 engine, dark tinted windows, and a Bose sound system. My dad loved it because it was a solid vehicle (great for teenage drivers) and it had a mustang engine – so it was fun for him to drive when he got a chance. I hated it because I thought it was ugly. But when I drove it to school and realized all the boys liked it... I changed my mind. The car wasn’t technically mine, it belonged to my dad and it was meant to be shared between my sister and I as we learned to drive and gained some independence.

Melanie and I were 18 months apart in age and could not be more different in personality and on the road. She loved to drive fast and take risks. I was a careful driver but enjoyed blasting Nsync from the car stereo, singing along at the top of my lungs with friends in the passenger seats. Initially, we got along and were able to trade off days with the car. I’d have it one week, she’d get it for the weekend. She’d get it the next week and I would have it the following weekend. It all worked beautifully. Until one day, my sister had the car out the night before it was my turn. It was getting late, I was already in bed, when the phone rang. My stomach sank. I knew she’d wrecked the car.

¹ <https://www.rd.com/culture/famous-sibling-rivalries/>

I sprung up from my bed and ran into my parents' room, where they were still on the phone with my sister. "Is the car totaled?" I wanted to know. Before the words even came out of my mouth, I could feel my body swell with anger. I just knew it. She couldn't be trusted with the car. All that fast driving, all those curves on the road... I was so mad at her for ruining the fun day that I had planned for my friends. Now I was going to have to drive my mom's minivan. Ugh.

20 years and a lot of perspective later, this memory feels a lot like how I imagine Jesus must have felt when the brother approaches saying: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Jesus responds by refusing to participate in the unhealthy triangle to which he's been invited. He redirects the conversation to focus on the soul condition of the brother who poses the question. "Look out for all kinds of greed," Jesus warns. "Life isn't about money or possessions."

Sounds a lot like the way my parents responded to my concern about the shared vehicle, late that night. "Your sister is fine," dad said, "thanks for asking... go back to bed."

The land of a rich man produced more abundantly than he had planned for. So, he had an unfortunate storage problem. So, in conversation with himself, he asks, "What should I do?... Ahh, I know, I'll tear down my old barns and build larger ones in their place... and then I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have everything you need. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Sometimes parables don't need any explanation. Sometimes scripture doesn't need any cultural translation. In a way, the reading for today fits that description. We don't have to drive far to see small barns (so to speak) being torn down and replaced by larger ones. It doesn't take much creative license to wonder about all the excessive grain that might be stored in those new "barns." But this is a dangerous path for many of us to travel because before too long we have to reckon with the sizes of our own barns, the amount of our own grain stored up in houses, cars, 403(b)s and IRAs. How much is too much?

When we return to the scripture we might find that our questions sound a lot like the driving question from which Jesus has redirected us. Our questions, like those we find in scripture, too often are about numbers and percentages, thresholds and boundaries that make us feel better about ourselves and help us to justify our own materialism.

"Tell him to divide the inheritance with me."

"Donate 10% here and \$20 there..."

"Set aside a little for that non-profit and that way you don't have to feel guilty about how you spend the rest."

It's a reasonable request, much like the one that started all of this today: "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance." ...Just make him share, tell him to give me half!

But notice how Jesus responds to a question about money, with a story about life. "Watch out", he says, "*life* is not about inheritance."

The parable supports the new direction Jesus is taking with the brother. Notice, the land produces the crop. The implication being the produce belongs to the earth, not to the rich man. And once the crop is harvested, the man struggles because not only has he no one to talk with about his abundance, but he also has no one to pass it down to... no one to share it with. The solitary character has all the material resources to enjoy his life and yet no one with whom to share it.

How has he isolated himself so?

This guy would fit right in with so many of us. He's a hard worker, he's successful, he doesn't mind a home renovation project, he wants to enjoy his life. Unfortunately, his priorities are misplaced and he's been investing in all the wrong places.

"The rich farmer is not a fool because he is wealthy, or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself, and because he [seems to believe] that he can secure his life with abundant possessions."² Says Elisabeth Johnson, Bible scholar and professor at Fordham University.

One thing the rich fool, the brother seeking half the inheritance, and my teenage self have in common is that we were all focused on the wrong things. Through our misguided priorities, we had each come to believe that our material goods were more important than our human relationships. The rich fool has no one in his life. The brother is willing to sacrifice the relationship with his sibling, in order to inherit half of the family wealth. And I was so concerned about the status of our car that I had failed to consider whether or not my sister was OK after a terrifying car accident.

Crazy thing is, the car wasn't even mine to begin with. It belonged to my father. Just like the family wealth belonged to the older brother (according to ancient inheritance rules), and the crops that produced abundantly – those belonged to the land itself – at least according to the parable. So, who are we to claim ownership and assume that what we have is for our individual protection, security, and amusement?

The rich farmer is not a fool because his land produces abundantly but because he lives his life as though production and possessions are all that matters. Throughout scripture and certainly in Luke's Gospel, we are reminded that our relationships with one another always come before material gain and our individual wellbeing. Time and time again

² Elisabeth Johnson. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4048

Jesus' actions model for us selflessness, compassion, and generosity. With his life, Jesus shows us that our lives should not be spent seeking success and material satisfaction but in service and authentic relationship with one another. Said another way, our lives are to be spent building up and investing in God's family.

This is both an individual and shared calling for people of faith. First, we must realize that what we have does not belong only to us, but it belongs to God. Through our personal stewardship we are called to give generously, sharing our resources – all of them – for the building up of God's church and the family that is growing here. Together, as one Greystone family, we are also called to become faithful stewards of God's gifts. How are we doing when it comes to our shared resources?

On the surface, this parable seems to be about money and material possessions. It certainly has much to teach us about our financial stewardship. The more I read the parable this week, the last question began to leap off the page. "The things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

I thought about that question and considered the many barns we have and grains for which we are responsible. And I remembered the church itself, the building, the ministries, the programs, the worship services, and the family that gathers here. As I considered this great resource and the ways in which we make decisions, I couldn't help but wonder... what are we building? What kind of barns are we building up here, on this plot of land? And for whom are we preparing?

Are we building a church that fits our own needs and desires? A church that looks like the ones handed down to us by our parents and grandparents... even if it means we're building a church that no longer speaks to future generations?

Are we building a church that ultimately serves our own goals and purposes? Will we come to the end and realize that we have no one with whom to share this great treasure?

The Greystone family is growing today. A few moments ago, we baptized one of our recent high school grads. Through the waters of baptism, we welcomed her into this family as our sister in Christ. And, in a few moments, we will covenant with a young family to walk alongside them as they raise their two children in the Christian faith, and in this church.

Family Matters! And as ours is growing today we are called to ask ourselves what kind of church are we building with all the resources God has entrusted to us?

Is it one that seeks only to preserve what has been? One that focuses on the past and seeks to re-create the church of those who have gone before? OR is it one that boldly and courageously responds to the needs of our world... asking hard questions, leaning into disagreement about the lesser things, offering

our resources for the building up of the *whole* family, and always remembering that the relationships we build with one another and with our neighbors are far more important than the size of our barns or the weight of our crop.

Family matters. And God is calling us to invest in our family.

Because after all is said and done, we will have to consider all the things we have prepared... *whose will they be?*