

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
August 4, 2019

Luke 12:13-21

Tevye prays as he begins the song, “If I were a Rich man” from the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Dear God, you made many, many poor people.

I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor.

But it's no great honor either!

So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?

A small fortune. We laugh at Tevye. But I suspect everyone of us has pondered the question, and made, at least a mental list, of what to do with such a windfall. Everyone has pondered the question, because—there is almost *no one* who thinks he or she is rich. There’s always the comparison game—in the comparison game, there is always someone who has more. As a matter of fact, everyone sitting here, has at least two pairs of shoes, and probably a closet full of clothes. By world standards, that makes you rich. If you can pull together a net worth of \$93,000, you richer than 90 percent of people around the world. But, what’s so great about having more than others? Tevye wants a big house in the center of the town. He wants to be viewed by others as rich.

There would be one long staircase just going up,

And one even longer coming down,

And one more leading nowhere, just for show.

Tevye wants his wealth to shout out to the world that he is wealthy.

I'd fill my yard with chicks and turkeys and geese and ducks

For the town to see and hear.

Their squawking would land like a trumpet on the ear,

As if to say ‘Here lives a wealthy man.’

Tevye wants to be rich so he will be respected.

*The most important men in town would come to fawn on me!
They would ask me to advise them,
Like a Solomon the Wise. 'If you please, Reb Tevye...'
Pardon me, Reb Tevye...'*

Tevye shows great understanding of how the wealthy are treated.

*And it won't make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong.
When you're rich, they think you really know!*

Umberto Eco—cultural essayist and novelist, has written recently that in this culture of ours there has been a dramatic shift—*recognition* has become a prime virtue. We now live in a world where people will do anything to be seen on television—so as to be recognized by people—to avoid, what he calls, *unbearable anonymity*.

*People will do anything to be “seen” and “talked about.”
There is no difference between the fame of the great immunologist
and that of the young man who kills his mother with a hatchet...
..to be seen and recognized the next day by the grocer or banker.*

Or takes a rifle and kills people indiscriminately in a school or Walmart or in any town like Dayton, Ohio.

Eco asks,

*Why do people position themselves behind a person being interviewed
so as to be seen waving to the television audience...What does it matter?
I'm not being apocalyptic, but....*

This is now apocalyptic.

Tevye envisions his wife as a wealthy woman who supervises the cooking of meals rather than doing it herself, he sings:

I see her putting on airs and strutting like a peacock.

Oy, what a happy mood she's in.

Screaming at the servants, day and night.

I'm sure we all know people like this. People who think others exist only to make the lives of the rich easier and more comfortable. It is a common misunderstanding—to think—to come to the wrong conclusions. *To treat others as we would NOT like to be treated.*

Today's Gospel is a warning to us all! To be rich in things is not the same as being rich in God. To be rich in things can be deadly. The problem for the rich man is that he believes the lie—the lie that money can make you happy or give your life purpose! The problem for the rich man is that he or she can easily miss the real mark and be swallowed up in obsessions and anxieties, feel threatened by others and even harbor murderous distain. Is this the purpose of life? It is certainly not about stuff! And not about hating yourself if you don't have stuff!

Tevye's dream of wealthy threatens to rob him of what is most important—what he already has, in abundance. Robbing him of what is truly life-giving and what is worth living for!

Many of you know that I have an app on my phone that reminds me five times a day that I am going to die. It is intended to make you stop and think about what is most important. I paid 99 cents for this reminder. It's a wake-up call, Just like today's Gospel! Moments ago I was reminded— with words from Mary Oliver's poem, "When Death Comes." She writes,

~ When it's over, I want to say:

all my life I was a *bride of amazement*.

~ I want to step through the door full of curiosity.

~ I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood.

Curiosity and amazement. Connectedness. Knowing that you are a *creature of God*—not the creator! A life lived with curiosity and amazement has nothing to do with money and things. The word “life” in Greek can be one of two words: *bios*, which is simply life as opposed to being dead, biological life— existence. Then there is the word *zōē*. It encompasses all that makes life worth living—all that is real and valuable about life: satisfaction, fulfillment, enjoyment, meaning, purpose, that which gives peace, joy, hope and blessing.

Kind of a cheap shot to remind us all, but you never saw a hearse pulling a U-Haul. You can't take it with you. The stuff doesn't go.

Years ago I remember reading excerpts from a journal written by a woman who had traveled to Haiti with a group on what was called, “A Reverse Pilgrimage.” It was sponsored by a group called *Ministry of Money*. *Ministry of Money* offered to take people (the rich— us) to a place where they could learn more about living. The woman who wrote the journal volunteered in a hospital for the dying. She was told that she was not there to “fix” anything, but to “be with” the patients. In her journal she wrote,

I learned what my hands and arms are really for.

I thought they were wearing rings and bracelets.

I found out that my hands and arms are for touching and holding.

The mission statement of *Ministry of Money* is this:

- ~We equip people to build honest, just, community-centered relationships with money.
- ~ To develop solidarity with God's wider community.
- ~ To live more fully as God's faithful, interconnected, generous people.

The first hint of a problem in the story Jesus tells about the rich man lies in the man's use of the first-person pronoun. Go through the parable again and circle the words “I” and “my” to get a

sense of the man's self-absorption. In his short conversation with himself, he uses the word "I" six times and the word "my" five times. He gives no thought to a bonus for his hired hands or a service project for his community. He offers no word of thanksgiving to God for the tremendous harvest. Everything is "I" and "my." He is a fool on many counts.

I'm with Mary Oliver—Fools miss out. They miss out on being a creature of God with others, of all different kinds—including plants and animals, sun, moon and stars—in this great and amazing life! There's so much more going on than the stuff we think we own or the power we think we need or the recognition we are told we must have in order to exist. The problem is not wealth but the loneliness it can produce.

Rich toward God? What does this mean? It must certainly mean *being thankful to God for our blessings*. It must certainly mean *giving back to God out of thanksgiving*. It must certainly mean *generosity toward others*, both friends and strangers. It must certainly mean, *loving yourself and loving others*— because we are all wonderful creations and children of God.

Wealth is a hard taskmaster. And rather dangerous. It's counter-intuitive. Riches don't set us free. Riches can limit us, imprison us, turn us into monsters. Rather than setting us free, it can crowd out our faith in God and isolate us from each other.

Here's a re-vision of Tevye's opening prayer.

*Dear God, you made many, many people.
Help me to rejoice in the great richness of diversity you have set before us.
Help us to give thanks for the beauty and wonder of the world.
Most of all, help us to love one another, and "to give beauty back,
beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver."*

Words borrowed from the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

*O why are we so haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed,
so fagged, so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered,
when the thing we freely forget is kept with fonder a care,
fonder a care than we could have kept it.*

Amen.