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Stop, Luke, and Listen: A Summer Sermon Series 7. Stuff

Luke 12:13-21 The Message translation. 13 Someone out of the crowd said [to Jesus], "Teacher, order my brother to give me a fair share of the family inheritance." 14 He replied, "Mister, what makes you think it's any of my business to be a judge or mediator for you?" 15 Speaking to the people, he went on, "Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot." 16-19 Then he told them this story: "The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: 'What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.' Then he said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!' " 20 Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?' 21 "That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."

I can oh-so-clearly remember the day when our son Andrew was about three years old and he made one of those passages from one stage of life to the next. You see, I had baked some cookies that day. Chocolate chip ones. His favorite kind (and mine). He had already had two or three of them that afternoon, and then wanted yet more. I said *"No, you've had enough; you'll ruin your dinner."* He persisted. *"But, Daddy, I **want** a cookie."* *"No, Andrew, no more cookies."* And then came the shift, that passage from one stage of life to another; for he started in one more time and said *"But, I want....."* and then he stopped himself and started again – *"But I **need** a cookie."* In that moment he had made a small but oh-so-significant **shift**, a shift that, as with all of us, would be with him for the rest of his life. For think with me about the difference between **"want"** and **"need."** **Wants** are simply desires, just wishes. We can **want** and wish for and desire all kinds of things. But notice something: such **desires** are discussable. You can **reason** about your wants and wishes. If I **want** a 120 inch flat screen tv, well it's possible to discuss that desire. It's possible to decide, rationally, that the *reasons* for that wish are not very good ones. I might **want** to eat an entire carton

of ice cream, but there are some very good **reasons** not to do so.

But notice something else – when “I **want**” gets converted into “I **need**,” then all of that discussability, all of that being subject to reason, goes out the window. When Andrew only **wanted** a cookie, it was possible (well, as possible as anything is with a sugar-soaked toddler) to offer him **reasons** why another cookie would be inadvisable. Even three year olds can begin to understand cause and effect. But when he converted his claim into “I **need**” then such reasoning is no longer even *possible*. Because what do you do in the face of somebody’s claiming that he or she “**needs**” something? “I need” ends the discussion. “I need” is, to use a fancy word, “self-certifying” – the very fact that I claim that I “need” something ups the ante. And if you say you “need” something, it seems churlish or rude to respond “Uh, no you don’t!”

Our scripture this morning is an a very good example of what happens when we **confuse** our wants with our needs, when **desire** turns into **demand**. Now, this scripture is not a pleasant thing to hear, is it?. I saw some of you flinch ever-so-slightly as XXX read the parable! Why? Well, it’s about **money**, and we can get uncomfortable talking about money in church. And yet, if we are to be faithful to scripture we must, on occasion, address the topic of money. After all, almost half of Jesus’ parables deal with money. *In fact, one out of ten verses in the New Testament deal with money.* And while the Bible has five hundred verses about prayer, it has over two thousand on money.¹ **Why** is there this emphasis in scripture? Well, the Hebrew and Christian tradition knows that money is one of the most powerful things there is, and it is one of the vehicles by which you and I are most tempted to rationalize what are really our wants and wishes as things we allegedly “need.” But money and possessions

¹John MacArthur, Jr., [The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](http://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/index.cfm), quoted at <http://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/index.cfm> Proper 13C (August 5) Luke 12:13-21

in and of themselves are not the problem; the problem comes when money and possessions become what define us. One preacher tells a story that illustrates what can happen when the **want** of ever-more money and stuff gets rationalized into a “**need**.” He says: *“I have some distant relatives whose lives revolve around making and spending money. To visit with them is to hear one story after another of [the] money they have made and the things they have bought. They think that nobody likes them because they are rich, but the **fact is that nobody likes them because they are boring.**”*²

Did you pay attention to that next-to-last verse in the parable? It says in Petersen’s translation *“Fool! Tonight you die”* or in the perhaps more familiar New Revised version, *“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.”* But my wife, the Reverend Barbara Blaisdell, shared a brilliant insight with me: that verse can also be translated this way: **“Tonight your stuff will demand your life.”** For you see, when “want” gets made into “need,” then our stuff indeed more and more owns us, not the other way around. And you know what? Jesus’ statement that *“tonight your stuff will demand your life”* is not really so much a **judgment** as it is simply an **oh-so-true observation!** For when the possessions that we own in fact own us then they do indeed take more and more of our life’s time and attention.

So what happens when you or I illegitimately turn “want” into “need” and our “stuff” more and more demands our time and attention? Well, a couple of things. First, we can become more boring. Because “I need” is a jealous mistress and she wants us to say *“I, I, I, I... me, me, me, me.”* And that also, in turn, indeed tends to isolate us more and more, turns us inward more and more, and there is less and less room for others. We can see that Jesus’ parable, which is probably the most self-centric parable

²Adapted from Richard Donovan, <http://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/index.cfm> Proper 13C (August 5) Luke 12:13-21. Emphasis mine.

that He told; did you notice that? ***I will gather, I will build, I will do. I, I, I.*** The man in the parable doesn't say a word about his family or his friends whom he could help out with his unexpected bounty. As one writer notes, *"In [the man's] short conversation with himself, he uses the word 'I' six times and the word 'my' five times. He offers no word of thanksgiving to God for his tremendous harvest. Everything is 'I' and 'my.'"*³ There is a modern word for this: self-absorption. And that fits: for his stuff, his desires, his wants, they own him – they so absorb him in himself that there is no room for anyone else.

But let's turn in a different direction. For while the parable's emphasis on "stuff" and money and possessions is important and worthy of our honest self-acknowledgment, this insight, this warning, that **"your stuff will demand your life"** is also about **more** than just money, about **more** than just *material* stuff. For you see, for some of you, the temptation of *material* stuff may not be your most tempting sin in this regard. In fact, I'll bet that's true for lots of you here. Why? Well I know that so many of you are so very generous, so very selfless in your giving of time and treasure. Our congregation's current \$18,000 budget surplus is a testimony to that; the clinking of all those coins this morning to help our neighbors in need attests to that. And yet I suspect for each on here, there are other less dramatic, less tangible, but no less real ways that something threatens to absorb you, some aspect of your spiritual stuff threatens to own you in ways that it shouldn't.

Maybe for some of you what is always threatening to take over your life, demanding your time and attention and absorption, even tending to isolate you as you brood, is an old **resentment**. Do any of you have one of those? Maybe over the years, like that farmer whose crop was so huge he couldn't hold it all, there is a resentment in your soul that just keeps growing. And that resentment can indeed take over, can't it? It demands more and more of you. It is forever turning you from what **could** be back to

³Richard Donovan, www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/index.cfm Proper 13C (August 5) Luke 12:13-21.

what **wasn't**. Yet how does that feel? How does that make you act? And what room – amidst that resentment – is there for God's promise of transformation and hope for your life when your barns are so full of bitterness?

Or maybe your spiritual barns are overflowing with something different. Maybe it's not a resentment but instead a **regret** about your life that has come to take up a huge space in your psyche. And it indeed absorbs you – the thought of what you didn't do but should have; the thought of what you did do but shouldn't have. *"This night your soul is required of you." "This night your stuff demands your life."* And that's when it's hardest, isn't it? At night. That's when our regrets are the most demanding. *"What if I hadn't done this? What if I had done that instead?" I'm so sorry that I didn't do..."* Doesn't the very act of re-hashing and revisiting serve to **feed** that regret, serve to make it stronger and more durable, serve to let it take over more and more of your soul? And, again, the effect can be the same as with nursing a resentment: you brood. You may find yourself more and more isolated in this or that way. And in your isolation, you may think that there is no hope for change. The sheer unintended but real self-absorption of that leaves you tired – and it leaves God less able to move you forward.

But my friends, the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ this day is this: it **IS** possible to move forward. **It is**. Whether it is an over-emphasis on possessions or money, or whether it is a regret or resentment or something else that takes up too much space in your soul, keeps demanding your life from you, it **is** possible to give those up. How? Well, let me suggest this as a place to start, a daily discipline that can begin to un-muck your spiritual barn; I want to suggest that you make your first thought and prayer every morning this: *God, thank you for loving me just as I am – and thank you for loving me so much that you won't leave me **where** I am.* For, you see, God knows that you have some regrets and resentments, some things that you're not proud of in your past; God knows that there are ways that you have pretended that what you want is

what you need, and that you may have a barnful of psychic stuff that clamors for your attention and threatens to absorb you – *and God loves you anyway*. **God loves you anyway**. But God indeed loves you too much to leave you there.

A man by the name of Ricardo Semler tells of a lesson he learned at his company. He recalls once a meeting where the agenda was to discuss buying \$50,000 worth of more file cabinets. But it turns out that they didn't buy a single new file cabinet. Instead, they decided instead to stop the company for a day and hold the First Annual File Clean-Out Day. The instructions were simple: every employee was told to look inside every single file folder and throw away every single nonessential piece of paper. Mr. Semler says that it turned out that he himself was in fact one of the company's biggest file hogs, with four large cabinets in his office – and he had thought that he needed two more! But after that impromptu clean-up day it turned out that he actually needed only one single cabinet. He says that was pretty much how it went throughout the entire company – and when everyone was done throwing away all that unnecessary paper, the company actually auctioned several dozen unneeded file cabinets!⁴

What, my friends, can you throw away? What **want** do you have that you may think is a **need** – but really isn't? God will help you get rid of it. And then you can fill that now-newly-empty space with God's purpose and God's promise⁵: the **purpose** that God has for your life – the joyful, meaningful purpose of adding in your own unique way to the beauty of God's creation, using your own unique gifts and talents to help those who need what you have to give. And the **promise**: that God goes with you, helping you muck out those barns, loving you always, now and even to eternity. For that Good News – thanks be to God indeed!

⁴ Adapted from Richard Donovan, www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/index.cfm Proper 13C (August 5) Luke 12:13-21.

⁵ I never write about this notion of God's promise and God's purpose without being deeply grateful to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for the formulation of it.