

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 12:13-21

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The story for this week is Jesus' parable of the rich fool. This parable is one of what I would call "shock therapy" stories of the Gospel.

The Sound Structure

The introduction addresses the crowd: "Someone in the crowd said to him..." Recall that the crowd introduced at the beginning of chapter 12 consisted of thousands of people who were trampling on each other. So it's a big crowd. Someone in the crowd was yelling out, "Teacher, tell my brother..." Jesus is addressing this big crowd and he told the parable to them, so the parable also is big.

Another dimension of the sound is that when Jesus begins the parable, the first part describes the rich man talking to himself. This is relatively quiet given the crowd—"The land of a rich man produced abundantly and he thought to himself, 'what am I going to do? I don't have any place to store my crops and then he said,'"—and so that part of the parable is relatively slow and quiet.

But then there's a long sentence: "This is what I'll do, I'll pull down my barns and build bigger ones and there I'll store my grain and I'll say to my soul, 'soul'..." It just goes faster it gets louder and louder until the end, "relax, eat, drink be merry!" This episode has a big crescendo that is indicated by both the length of the sentence, which has six phrases in it, and the last one is the climax of the whole thing.

The last episode is God speaking to him. God speaks directly to the man at night and so this is quiet and slow: "God said to him, 'Fool. This night your life is being demanded from you, and as for all these things that you've prepared, whose will they be?'" You can sense from the structure of the story and its sound, the way in which it builds up to the climax of the rich man's celebration, that he's got it made. Then God gives him a wake-up call. Or perhaps it should be called a go-to-sleep call. The parable is certainly a wake-up call for Jesus' audience.

The Mnemonic Structure

The first part is structured by the man in the crowd who asked him to intervene: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance," and Jesus saying to him, "Hold it friend. Who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" So Jesus first of all responds, in terms of the structure, to the request, "Tell my brother." Jesus refuses saying, "Who set me up as a judge or arbitrator over you?" Then he says to the crowd, "Beware of all kinds of greed." The structure is...

- Man's request
- Jesus' refusal

- Warning to beware of greed
- Parable

The parable is structured to make it easy to remember. If you just pay attention to the mnemonic structures, you'll remember it easily.

The parable begins with the man asking himself, "What should I do?" and then answering, "This is what I will do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones and there I'll store my crops." So you've got...

- "What should I do?"
- "This is what I'll do"
- "Barns/store my crops"

The final episode is an address to his soul and again it's a verbal thread: "Soul, you have goods stored up for many years." The last part of remembering is that the rich man says, "Soul" and God said, "Fool." So its...

- Soul
- Fool

The power of this parable is related to a dynamic that is present in many of Jesus' parables. He leads his listeners into identification with a character who is then judged by God or who does something that is radically wrong. In this case Jesus invites his listeners to identify with the dilemma of a rich man.

He is the envy of every peasant farmer in Jesus' audience: "Wow, I wish I had that problem that my fields would produce so much that I don't have any place to store crops." And it builds to the climax of his rejoicing. This is "the price is right" and "the million dollar question" and somebody winning it all. What happens in the parable is that when God says, "Fool," it is addressed to the listeners who have identified with the character to whom it's addressed. God's words are heard and experienced as being addressed to every listener.

The impact of this structure is always to make one think, to shock one into thinking about this issue. In this case the issue is rejoicing in and celebrating about having a lot of stuff and placing your life and your spirit in your investments and in the goods that you have accumulated. That is set in the context of tonight might be the end of your life and so where do you want to invest your money? Do you want to invest it in things that don't last or in things that do last?

The parable in effect requires its listeners—that is, anybody who identifies with the rich man—to *think* about it. The character of Jesus' thought is also reflected in this parable, which is to think back from the future. Jesus is always thinking back from the future of the coming of the kingdom of God into the present. So if you think back from the end of your life, imagine standing before God at the last judgment, whatever it is that's out there

in the future, think back from that moment to the present and consider how the present will look in light of that future. That's how Jesus is always thinking.

In this case, the purpose is to think back from the end of your life and specifically to calculate value. What is it that at the end of your life you will be able to say, "That's something I'm glad I invested in?" The danger of greed, which is endemic in American culture and is celebrated in movies, is present here in Jesus' parable. I think of the movie *Wall Street* where Michael Douglas says, "Greed is good! Greed is great! We all believe in greed and that's what this country is about, it's built on greed."

There is some truth to what Michael Douglas' character says. Greed has led us into our current economic mess. We're trying now to figure out ways in a corporate sense to put limits on greed and to control it, so that it doesn't subvert the well-being of everybody in the world.

That's also not just a communal issue. It's a personal issue as to how is it that we now spend the time and resources of our lives. Do we spend our time trying to accumulate more things or investing ourselves in the kingdom of God and in spiritual values like love and peace, things that will last. Jesus' last statement is, "That's the way it is and it's the way it will be with people who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

So the question that the parable raises is, "How can you be rich toward God? How can you invest and become rich in the values and the things of the kingdom of God?" In the telling of the story, I would recommend that you enter fully into its spirit and not hold back from the shock of the parable. The problem with the detached reading that we have practiced is that it takes the shock out of the parable so that people are not invited into the parable and required to think about their own life. The parables were intended to shock. So do it, don't hold back from making it happen. It's a good thing for your listeners.