

In his book, *Jacob the Baker: Gentle Wisdom For a Complicated World*, Jewish poet-philosopher, scholar and theologian, Noah BenShea, writes, “Either the key to a man's wallet is in his heart, or the key to a man's heart is in his wallet. So, unless you express your charity, you are locked inside your greed.” Did you hear that? Unless you express your charity, unless you live generously by giving of what you have to others, you are locked inside, you are *imprisoned* in your greed! Wow!! I think Jesus would have liked what BenShea has to say because Jesus also has something to say about greed. Today, we hear Jesus tell us, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

Today, Jesus takes us to a place where most of us do not want to go as he draws us into a conversation about money. Quite frankly, talking about money makes us uncomfortable as individuals, uncomfortable within the context of our faith communities, and causes great anxiety. Many of us learn from a very early age that conversations about money are taboo. Avoiding such a conversation is one of those unspoken rules in our culture. We find it very uncomfortable to talk about the amount of money we make, the amount of money we tightly hold on to, the amount of money we hold in investments, the amount of money we have as disposable income, the

amount of money we pay in taxes, and the amount of money we give away. Well, today, Jesus breaks this unspoken rule and takes us into territory of the taboo as **he talks about money**. Today, Jesus exposes human greed and anxiety about money, and he uses his famous teaching tool, a parable, to burn away **any** illusion we may have that a godly life is synonymous with our American ideals of prosperity and success.

Quite frankly, Jesus talked more about our **relationship** with money **and** our possessions more than almost **any** other topic, and today is one example. The writer of Luke's gospel tells us Jesus is with a crowd of people and he is teaching. He is approached by a man who asks him to arbitrate an inheritance dispute he is having with his brother. A family feud is set before him, and Jesus opts out of getting involved in the squabble. Instead, he uses the opportunity to talk about money and a right **relationship with** money. Jesus tells a story that has become known as the Parable of the Rich Fool. Now, it is important to recognize that the man in this parable is **not** portrayed as particularly wicked. He is **not** defined as one whose wealth was gained by illegal means. He is **not** one of those despised tax collectors and he has **not** stolen anything. From the little we do know about him, we can surmise that he became wealthy by the sweat of his brow, by very **honest** means. He is a farmer, and his land has

produced immense harvests. Truthfully, his decision to save for the future by building bigger barns does not seem all that unreasonable. He simply needs space for his abundant harvest. So, I must ask, what is wrong with saving for a rainy day?

Well, the truth is there is nothing wrong with saving for a rainy day. This rich fool's foolishness is **not** necessarily about his plan to build a bigger barn. His foolishness has **everything** to do with his heart! His **foolishness** is all about the **relationship** he has **with** his money and possessions. Did you happen to notice the dialogue this man is having with himself? If we take a deeper look at the inner conversation going on within this man, it becomes rather enlightening. He says, "What should **I** do, for **I** have no place to store **my** crops? **I** will do this. **I** will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there **I** will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And **I** will say to **my soul, Soul, you** have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Did you notice the hubris, the focus on **self**, the attention and emphasis on the **me**, the importance of the "**I**"? As Episcopalian priest Anjel Scarborough points out, "In this short internal dialog, consisting of approximately 60 words, the man uses 11 references to himself with the personal pronouns '**I**' and '**my**'. If we add to this the words that reference

‘soul’ and ‘you’ as part of that inner dialog about himself, then we have 22 percent of the words in this short passage talking about, well, ‘**me**.’”

Yes, it is all about him. **Everything** revolves around **him**! You see, this rich fool’s **foolishness** has **everything** to do with his **heart**. Here we get a glimpse of this man’s spiritual illness. As my colleague says, “This man is all about the **unholy** trinity of me, myself, and I. There are no references at all to others – not to family, friends, or those in need, and certainly no references to God. He is under the mistaken belief that all this wealth is his: it is **his** possession, it is in **his** control, and he lives with the delusion that **he alone** produced this wealth.” This man has much money, **but** the key to his heart is in his wallet and his heart is spiritually, morally, and ethically bankrupt!

Well, that is not the end of the story. His narcissistic perspective is not his **only** delusion. The other delusion that truly distorts this man’s relationship with his wealth is brought to light when God addresses him. God says, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Oh my! Here we get to something that is so important, something that **none** of us want to face. Here we get to the heart of what is really true about life, and that is the stark reality of death. It is here where the truth is revealed. You see,

when we face this **ultimate** reality, we soon discover that **no** amount of wealth or possessions can save us from our own finitude. This man will die. **We** will die. And, you know what? Death is **the** great equalizer because, when we die, our net worth in dollars is really **zero**! And nothing, no matter how hard we try, can prevent our death. With death we discover **all** that we have, **all** that we own, **all** our striving to make it to the top – **all** of these are temporal and **none** of these things are of **ultimate** worth. **None** of these things will save us.

Theologian, David Schlafer, when talking about today's gospel reading and **our** relationship as a community of faith with money, shares these words of wisdom:

Money serves as a kind of thermostat for issues of anxiety and control within our congregations. As the work of Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke on family systems illustrates, money matters often reveal the true heart of a church organization, as well as of our individual households. Money is always about more than money. Our spending, our saving, and our general attitude toward material wealth are all invested with emotions and memories. A capacity to trust in **God** can deepen **only** as other matters lessen their grip in our lives. Today's Gospel text sets that reality before us in the starkest terms. (*Feasting on the Word*, p. 312)

Our money and possessions are **not** going to save us. Yet, while we know this in our heads, our hearts have a difficult time believing this. Our **anxiety** over money issues controls us and determines our actions and the way we live as stewards of all that we have been given. We are anxious

about our jobs, about our retirement and the way a bi-polar stock market effects our 401(k)'s, about putting our kids through school, about paying all our bills, about inflation, and so much more. As we look at our anxieties regarding money, do you see how they are all focused on the **self**? This internal focus on self becomes one in which the key to our hearts is in our **wallets** and **we** become imprisoned in our anxieties and our greed.

As Christians, we are called to shift our attention and emphasis away from the small, vain, egocentric self and focus outward by living into a radical **trust** in **God**. When that happens, we view wealth very differently. In fact, we begin to see that our money and possessions are **not really ours at all**. They **all** belong to God. **All** that we have and **all** that we are comes **from God** and really is only on **loan**. God invites us into a life that is **greater** than our anxious fear over things that have no **ultimate** worth. God invites us into a deeper relationship with God's very self and with each other. God invites us into the eternal economy of God's grace, mercy, and love – the immeasurable love we see exhibited in the **self-emptying** life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we see the very heart of God, and **that** is where we find the **ultimate** and **lasting treasure** – the key that unlocks **our** hearts so we can live for **others**, the key that enables us to live lives that are rich toward God.