

Have you ever fantasized about having a windfall of money and how excited, relieved, and secure you'd feel. You know – pay off the credit cards and the mortgage, buy a new car, get vacation home, travel all over, retire early. That's pretty much what happened to the rich farmer in this parable.

So, what would you do? It probably depends, as it did with this man, on who you talked to. This man, talked only to himself. He didn't even think of anyone else when the windfall came his way. Likely because he was used to thinking only of himself, talking only to himself, about what he already had.

Jesus wants us to see that there's a problem with that. The tip-off is how God speaks to the man. God says to this guy who's spent his life storing up what the land's given him, "You fool!" God seems both frustrated and sad, "You fool! This very night, your life, your soul will be demanded of you."

The story begins by saying that "the land produced abundantly" for this rich man. And, make no mistake about it, as a landowner in a society where few people owned land, he was rich even before that amazing harvest. That's true for us too, in spite of the recession. "Rich" is a word we don't like to apply to ourselves, but by global standards that's what we are. And, more to the point: the land produced abundantly. There's no talk of hard work. The point is - abundance happened: "the land produced abundantly." That's our situation; we didn't bring it about. We didn't choose to be born in the world's richest country. Yet we've been blessed; abundance has been given to us.

So what do we do with all that's been so generously dropped in our laps? Most of what we have and are – opportunity, initiative, intelligence, education, and energy, and so much more, have been given to us. The parable says if we're only talking to ourselves, if we've cut God out of our inner conversation, we'll likely make the same choice as the rich farmer – store it up! To which God sadly says, "You fool!"

Remember the totally deadpan comedian, Steven Wright, the master of absurdity? He says: "You can't have everything ...where would you put it?" But, like the man, we think, "I'll find a place!"

The land produced abundantly, and the man talked to himself, "What should I do, for I've no place to store my crops?" ... "I'll do this: I'll 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, and be merry!'"

There it is: my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul. But then, it's as if God interrupts his talking to himself to say, "Um, not quite so fast. Your soul? This very night it is demanded of you." The truth is that our very existence is given—given to us – by God. Our souls are not our possession; they belong to God.

God continues, "And the things you've prepared, and stored up, whose will they be? If life's about getting, we all fail in the end. As it's been said, "There's no trailer hitch on a hearse. You fool!"

God says, "You fool—you have no control!" The man's death shows his precariousness, points out his foolishness. God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you."

His life isn't his own; it isn't under his control. The rich man is foolish because he's lived as if he was in control, as if he could make it for himself, with his "stuff," of course. But he's not in control; he can't make his own life; nor be saved by his stuff. His folly is that he illustrates Jesus' words, "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose their souls/lives?"

The occasion for Jesus to tell this parable is that someone interrupts his teaching to ask him to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance. Jesus sees this as an expression of the interrupter's greed,

and says, "Beware! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then, he tells this parable.

On the most obvious level, the parable seems to say, "don't be greedy!" Greed only makes you poor toward God. And if that's true, how could this man be rich toward God?

Well, he could've given some away. As Cynthia Campbell, put it, "Since we can't be rich toward God whom we can't see without being rich toward our neighbor whom we do see, we can't avoid the question of what's good for more than *me*." He could've given some away - probably a lot more than he thought he could.

But he didn't. All he saw was, "**My** crops ...**my** barns ... **my** grain ... **my** goods ... **my** soul."

Remember the words from the great hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory* - "Shame **our** wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul?" They proclaim that this is more than an individual, personal problem; it's a shared, cultural one, too. We're taught, we're urged, to think only of ourselves, talk only to ourselves, about what we have, what we want, what we hold on to. We're taught and urged to live for a very "selfish" gladness, a gladness, though, that's always fleeting and empty.

Along with the issue of greed, this parable also raises the question, "What do we do with what's been so generously dropped in our laps?" The answer is—be generous.

How do we become generous when we live in a culture that promotes our impulse to live for "selfish gladness?"

First, we can begin by bringing others into our conversation, and thus, into our lives, into our hearts.

God should be the first one we begin to talk to. It's much harder to be selfish and greedy if God is part of your regular conversation, because then you're going to realize how much God loves you, and because of that love, abundantly blesses you every day, and you'll trust in that continued blessing, and won't be anxious or worried about holding on to it all to keep yourself secure. And you'll want to honor God with what you do with it, which, because God loves others just as much as you, will mean sharing it for their benefit.

We should begin to talk to others, too. It's also much harder to be selfish and greedy if others are part of your regular conversation, if you're in relationship with others, in a community that loves and cares for you, because that's where we find a richness that's more precious and enduring than any amount of material things can provide. I certainly experienced that being with our children and youth at camp this week, seeing their love and care for one another, and their joy at being together; despite all the dishes to do, the saggy bed, and the long walk to the restroom at night, I felt a fullness, a sense of blessing, that no amount of money or stuff could ever bring. The blessing that can only come through relationship, at inspires generosity, too, even sacrifice, because when you feel blessed by your relationship with others, their needs become important to you, and your love for them makes you want to do all you can with what God's given you to help their lives be good and full.

The second thing we can do is confront our fear. Selfishness and greed are a sign of our fear, of our failure to trust in the God of our lives. As Tom Long says "...the lifestyles of the rich and famous are the lifestyles of the always vulnerable and ever fearful."

Fear can drive us to lean on all sorts of substitutes for the One to whom we belong in life and death. Often it's not easy to trust such a God, a God who raised Jesus from the dead and so defeated death forever; many days it's not easy to have such trust. The parable warns us not to lose sight of the God who made us and to whom we belong, the one whom we can trust, and with whom we need not fear.

Our consuming, accumulating, and grasping after “things” expresses a lack of trust. It says we can only depend on ourselves, and on what we can get, and make of ourselves. We use “stuff” to prop up our sense of ourselves. From the guy who shows you his new BMW with an attitude that says not, “Look at this car,” but “Look at me, because I have this car,” to the guy who’s only got a shopping cart of stuff, but who proudly points out that it’s “my stuff”—we so often feel that what we have is who we are— because every other sense of ourselves is too much out of our control.

But Jesus calls us to put ourselves squarely in the hands of a God who will never be in our control. So Jesus asks, “And the things you have, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

To be rich toward God is generosity. To be rich toward God is sacrifice. To be rich toward God is kindness, charity, and hope. To be rich toward God is to give freely, generously, and fearlessly. And that giving, that generosity, comes from trust. May we always be in conversation with the one who inspires that trust!

Gracious God,

We give you thanks for your steadfast love, for your patience and forbearance, for your belief in us.

We thank you that when we stray you send us prophets and call us back.

And we are thankful for the word in scripture, as well as the word written clearly on our hearts.

Our prayer is that our thankfulness can be matched by our actions

O God, we tend to think only of ourselves, talk only to ourselves;

...we shut out you and others,

...and so we tend to look at life, choose a life-purpose, make decisions, in self-centered, selfish ways.

Help us begin to do that by looking at all you’ve given, your abundant blessing, and saying “thanks”

Help us continue by reflecting on your trustworthiness to continue to bless us, so we need not fear.

Help us, blessed and freed from fear, to continue by expressing our gratitude,

...by honoring your will that the needs of others be met,

...by sharing generously from our share of your abundance..

We pray for the “wise fools” of this world, who imagine that meaning lies solely in gain,

...without reflection or acknowledgment of the strength of your purpose.,

We pray for those so dedicated to the work of the gospel that they have lost sight of your love for us,

...grounded in Sabbath, grounded in rest, and renewal.

We pray for the exhausted ones, those frozen and inactive, struggling with meaning,

...frustrated with lack of progress, weary with the struggle.

We pray for those who think deeply, unable to act.

We pray for those who act quickly, without reflection.

We pray for ourselves, as your people, in all our imperfection, waiting for you to perfect us in grace,

...confident that in your time all will be well,

...and that your will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray for those known to us with special needs,