



Hope Beyond Security
A Sermon for Northminster Church
A Claire Helton
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Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘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. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Once upon a time, there was a humble fisherman who lived in a rugged, old barn with his wife Isabel. The fisherman was having a slow day. In fact, as their accommodations indicated, the fisherman had had many slow days. On this particular day, he was about to give up and go home with nothing when he got a bite. He pulled up the line to find not just any fish, but an enchanted prince in the form of a talking flounder. The flounder pleaded with the fisherman to let him go, and the fisherman, reasoning that he couldn’t kill a fish that could talk, let the flounder swim away.

When he came home emptyhanded, Isabel rebuked him, asking incredulously, “Did you catch nothing today?” He responded, “As a matter of fact, I did have one catch, but it was a talking fish who claimed to be an enchanted prince, so of course, I couldn’t kill him. I let him go on his

way.” The woman had read her fairy tales and was quick to recognize the opportunity this presented. “You let him get away without making a wish?!” she cried. “Go back immediately and find him!” The fisherman protested, “But what would I wish for?” Isabel persisted, “This chance has presented itself before you, it would be a shame to waste it. You might at least ask for a nice, clean cottage for us to live in.”

The fisherman reluctantly returned to the shore and, when the fish came to him, he made the request. He returned home to find his wife in the nice, clean cottage. Isabel showed him around their new home. “See now?” she prompted. “Isn’t this nice?”

“Indeed, it is,” the fisherman responded. “We shall live nicely here for many years.”

“Ah, we’ll see,” Isabel replied.

They did live nicely for a while, but after some time Isabel grew discontented once more. “You should’ve wished for a castle,” she said to her husband one day. “Go back and tell the fish you’ve made a mistake.” The fisherman was unwilling, but he went along with her request. And just as before, the flounder instantly granted what he asked. *And*, just as before, Isabel’s contentment did not last long. The story played out again and again: next Isabel wanted not merely to live in a castle, but for the fisherman to be king – and when he refused, she wanted to be king for herself. The fish made it so, but it wasn’t enough. She wanted to be emperor, and the fish made it so. But it wasn’t enough. Next, she wanted to be pope, and the fish made it so. But it wasn’t enough. Each time, the fisherman returned to the shore hesitantly, unwilling to ask more of the fish but loathe to refuse his wife’s request. What he somehow failed to notice was how all of nature seemed to rebel against what was taking place. With each trip back to the shore he faced a stormier and stormier sea: first gray skies, then choppy waves, then strong winds, thunder and lightning, and an earthquake.

When at last Isabel had become pope, that night as her husband slept, she tossed and turned, searching her mind for anything that was left for her to gain. All night long she stayed awake,

and as she watched the sun rise at dawn she realized at last: she had yet to control the sun and the moon. “Husband,” she said, “go and ask the fish to make me as God is.”

The fisherman put up a fight, but he did as he was told, and when the flounder heard the request, he, of course, granted it. /// And back the man went, to find his wife once more in the rugged, old barn they had once called home. And there they live to this day.

Eighteen hundred years before the Brothers Grimm published the fisherman’s tale, Jesus told a story with a similar concern at its core. Jesus’ parable in Luke 12 emerges, as many of the parables do, in response to a question. From the crowd gathered around him, Jesus hears the request, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!” And while some of us, especially those who have dealt with the delicate matter of dividing family inheritances, might hear that and think it sounds like a reasonable request – even an opportunity for Jesus to reverse an injustice – for whatever reason Jesus seems to hear in the man’s exclamation the undertones of greed rather than a legitimate concern. And so, he tells this story about a farmer who, having harvested more than he expected one year, realizes the abundance of his crops is going to outpace the room he has to store it in his barns. So, he decides to tear down his current barns and build bigger ones, thinking to himself, “Great, once that’s done I’ll be able to sit back and enjoy the fruits of my labor for years to come.” But then comes the catch: God appears in the story, though it might as well be the grim reaper, saying, “You fool, tonight is the night you die – so now what’s to become of all this abundance you’ve stockpiled away for yourself?”

Now, the farmer in the story seems to be a good American capitalist, he’s following solid business practices. If you asked him what he was after, he probably wouldn’t have said, “I’m a very greedy man.” He probably didn’t know that about himself. Instead, I imagine he would have given you a line about the importance of saving responsibly for the future, in order to

achieve financial security. He might have even offered some indication of his plans to give away a portion of his earnings to charity – you know, in the future. Down the road. I don't think Jesus set out to describe a man we would immediately see as a greedy villain. The point is that Jesus is calling his listeners to take a second look at the world around them; to question whether the wisdom of this world is really wisdom at all. Jesus might have just as easily summarized this parable in one of his well-known "you have heard it said" teachings: You have heard it said, 'Work hard now and save up for the future, that one day you might know security and the benefits it brings. But I say to you...' Well, I won't get ahead of myself.

This word, "security," is the word that has been on my mind so much as I have spent time with this parable this week. And it's troublesome, because security is not a bad thing. It's something we strive to provide for those around us, certainly something I strive to provide for my children, whether it's financial, or social, or in any other sphere of their lives. But the root of greed, it seems to me, is the desire for that very thing: the desire for security. We can become greedy with our money, greedy with our time, our energy, our resources – all in the name of preserving a certain level of security. But then, the thorn in my side is that the gospel I hear from Jesus is a gospel that calls not a soul toward security. It calls us instead to give our lives away, that we might find them; to love those who are incapable of loving us back; to make our way towards the back of the line every, every time. And I'm so moved when I remember this gospel...but then I also remember my kids, remember my job, remember my mortgage. And I have no patience for preaching a sermon that sends you all home feeling guilty that you're not radical enough. I've spent enough time living my life in that guilt.

That's why I'm so grateful this story doesn't seem to leave us there. This passage is not about *not* being greedy. Do you hear me? It's not about being not-greedy. Defining ourselves by what we're not is a good way to wind up feeling empty, hollow, directionless.

So, what is it this story is pointing us toward? It points us toward a story that's better than the story of security. It's about finding a story that is more compelling to us than the story where

we end up right where we're "supposed" to be, safe and sound. It's about learning to see our own stories as a part of this grander narrative that is, in fact, headed somewhere different than we are used to expecting. When we can learn to live in that story, greed is an unnecessary hindrance; we won't want it in the first place. So, what is that story?

Since we find this parable in Luke, the gospel of Luke might be the perfect place to begin. Luke's account of the Jesus story begins with a woman singing a song praising the God who lifts up the poor and overturns the governments of the rich. That woman becomes the mother of a baby born into a feeding trough; the first visitors to that baby recorded by Luke are the shepherds at the bottom of the totem pole; it's in Luke's gospel that we hear the beatitudes as blessings not just on the poor in spirit but the poor, the actual poor; in other words, Luke is not afraid of pressing the earliest followers of Jesus to address the socioeconomic implications of their orthodox belief. And Luke's gospel is the one that calls on the name of a God who dwells in the rugged, old barn.

When we have a story like that to guide our living, maybe we'll be able to operate out of hope rather than fear. Maybe we'll be able to live as if we believe in the power of love the way Jesus seemed to believe in it. Maybe we'll be able to allow that perfect love to cast out the fear that drives our never-ending quest for security. I pray it might be so.

In the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, he gives an unexpected amount of time to Mary, the mother of Jesus. After narrating the angel's delivery of the news that Mary would bear the messiah, Luke allows us to linger at the scene, watching as Mary's shock and disbelief grow into faith in something beautiful, something greater than the reality she has known, something like hope. Security was never really an option for Mary. Calling on the stories of God that have been passed down to her, Mary sings a song of a God who turns the world upside down, a God whose dreams of justice are not yet fulfilled – and yet whose dreams are beginning to come true even here, even now. What Mary finds in the song she sings is something more true, more real than our fragile hopes of security. What she finds is the deep and hopeful truth that will

permeate Luke's entire story of Jesus: the hope that God is turning the world around. In a contemporary adaptation of Mary's song, composer Rory Cooney set the words to the rhythm and rhyme of an Irish revolutionary tune, and called it the *Canticle of the Turning*. May these words that open the gospel of Luke illuminate our understanding of this parable as we seek to allow them to sink down deep into our hearts:

My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great, And my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait. You fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my weakness you did not spurn, So from east to west shall my name be blest. Could the world be about to turn?

From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone. Let the king beware for your justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his throne. The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they can never earn; There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

I struggle as much as the next person to believe that the turning is coming. I struggle as much as the next person to accept that our world is even capable of moving in the *direction* of the dreams God has for us, let alone seeing them fulfilled. But I have found that *this* faith requires more of me than any doctrine or creed ever has: to believe that God's justice is coming, and is now here, to believe that love will win the day, despite the latest headline, news feed, or twitter storm.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

O God, justice-bringer, love-maker, hope-bearer: grant that we might find in this parable of greed the seed of a hope we can hold onto, a hope that offers us a story worth more than the security we so desperately cling to.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn. Amen.