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SAINT JOHN'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



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HOUSE**™

A Separate Abundance

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Paul Escamilla

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A Separate Abundance

Luke 12:13-21

Elizabeth and I are considering the purchase of a small portable building for our backyard. We've been to the hardware store to see what's available. There they are, lined up, one after another, in the parking lot. It's so convenient—you drive through in your car and look them over, one after the other, and choose size, shape, color; plastic, wood, metal. It's kind of like shopping for an engagement ring. Only different.

I'm bothered by one thing. A lot of those portable storage buildings look like barns. It's not barns I don't like. In fact, barns are generally a very positive association for me. Barns remind me of Granddad's hay barn, and putting up alfalfa in bales in that barn in the summer. Barns remind me of the old red barn where the tractor was parked, and up in the loft were all kinds of cast off treasures. And then there was the barn near Grandmother and Granddad's house where Boss came every morning and every evening to be milked, and in the summers we had our opportunities to learn the mysteries of milking a cow. I have wonderful memories of barns.

Elaine Steffan, whose memorial service I participated in several years ago, was a young child when she saw her father working on the far end of the roof of the barn one day. This was up north, where the barns are tall and their pitches steep. Little Elaine found a fresh plum, and wanted to give it to her father. She climbed the ladder on the near end of that barn, made it to the roof, and with the plum in one hand and nothing but air in the other, she balanced her way across the ridgeline of that roof, all the way to her father, at which moment she surprised the daylight out of him, presenting him with the plum. He didn't know whether to be touched or terrified. That's what I think of when I see a little miniature barn in the parking lot of the hardware store.

That, and one thing more. This story.

Barns do not fare well in this story. An expanding man is shrunk to miniature status, and barns figure prominently in the process. He chooses to build a barn, and then a bigger barn. That's about the sum of the story, though in our minds it's the equivalent of the sorcerer's apprentice and brooms—bigger barns, and more of

them, and even bigger, and even more. So, needless to say, it bothers me to think about buying another barn for personal storage in the shadow of this story told by Jesus which he summarizes in advance with these words: “Life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions.”

We live just south of a county that, at least a few years ago, could name storage units as its leading industry. Good thing it’s the county just to the north of us, right? Surely none of us rent any of those Williamson County storage facilities, right? And certainly not Travis County storage facilities. Storing our stuff has become, for our generation, a foundational dimension of the American lifestyle. And storage is a burgeoning industry. Bigger and bigger barns. Climate-controlled, security-monitored. Nicer barns you’ve never seen.

How do we come to terms with that story in Luke Chapter 12 in which Jesus makes it clear that it is possible to be successful in accomplishments and a failure as a human being?

Goldman-Sachs has been splayed across the pages of the newspapers for months now. We’ve been able to scrutinize that company lately as though it had been dropped into a fishbowl. The outgoing president, Jon Winkelreid, was interviewed by New York Times writer William Cohan in April about what went wrong in that company in the last couple of years. He said, “Historically, Goldman-Sachs had three values that were at the top of the list. The first was ‘I care about my company’s reputation.’ The second was ‘I care about my own reputation.’ The third was ‘I care about doing the right thing.’ Whenever someone comes into the company and displaces one of those top three with this one: ‘I care about making money,’ they’re bound to get into trouble. And we did.” Goldman-Sachs does not traditionally understand making money as its primary objective, but rather, its integrity, its reputation, and doing the right thing. Reflecting on his words, Cohan writes, “Goldman Sachs is at a critical juncture in its 141-year history. Whether the firm is able to eke out a technical victory against the S.E.C. in civil court or not is almost beside the point. What is at stake at the once-invincible bank is a way of doing business that for generations brought the firm’s partners untold wealth, the admiration and respect of clients and the envy of its peers: the firm’s soul.”

Religious language on the business pages of the New York Times. How about that?

The story Jesus tells involves an individual entrepreneur’s soul, but it applies to companies, too, doesn’t it? And to families, and to each and all of us. What does it

mean to reconcile the abundance that comes from building and accruing and achieving and acquiring and this other sort of abundance that's more amorphous, that's difficult to put our hands on, an abundance that has more to do with offering our lives to God.

John Wesley was a young student at Lincoln College, Oxford University, studying to be a priest in the Anglican Church, when a porter knocked at his door one evening. The two had conversation in Wesley's doorway, when Wesley suddenly noticed that he was wearing a rather thin coat on what was a cold winter night. "You'd better go and get yourself a heavier coat, sir," he said. The porter answered, "Mr. Wesley, this is the only coat I have, and I thank God for it." Wesley said, "Tell me, have you had anything to eat today?" The porter said, "Well, I've had a drink of cold spring water, and I thank God for that." Wesley was beginning to feel a little bit awkward with such an unfamiliar display of piety. Not knowing quite how to deal with it, he said, "Well, you'd better get yourself on home before you're locked out for the night. Then, what will you have to thank God for?" The porter said, "I suppose then I would thank God for dry stones to lie upon." Wesley said, "You thank God when you have no coat? When you have no food, and no place to lay your head? I don't see what it is you have to thank God for!" The porter said, "I thank God for life and being, for a heart to love God and a desire to serve God." After the porter had left Wesley's door with a warm coat from Wesley's own closet, some money in hand from Wesley's own purse, and a word of deep appreciation from this young theology student for this man's witness, Wesley went to his writing desk and penned these words in his journal: "I will never forget that porter, for he convinced me that there is something in religion to which I am a stranger." A stranger – this man who's been reared in the Christian faith, trained and taught and schooled in his religion, now in theological studies, preparing to become a priest – a stranger to something in religion.

What could that something be? Perhaps it is the secret that there is a certain abundance available to all of us that has nothing to do with coats.

The psalmist knew it. "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . my cup runneth over." Abundance in the valley of shadows. The prophet knew it. "Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vine, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, yet will I rejoice in God, the God of my salvation is my strength." The apostle knew it. "I have learned the

secret of facing hunger and plenty, abundance and want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

We have company in learning what it means to live from that separate abundance that is not about the size of our barns, but about the wellspring of God’s love and grace, welling up in our hearts unceasingly.

In 1773 Frances Havergal wrote that beautiful hymn that we’ve come to know and love, “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee. Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.” Beautiful, beautiful poetry, later put to music. She wrote those words in 1773: “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.” You know that hymn. Five years later, in 1778, she wrote to a friend, “The Lord has led me to make a gift to the church’s mission home. I am sending them all of my jewelry, along with the jewelry cabinet for them to sell in order to utilize the proceeds. The cabinet itself is fit for a duchess. And the jewelry comes to almost fifty pieces. She ended the letter saying, “I don’t think I ever packed a box with greater pleasure.” She was listening to her own hymn, wasn’t she?

In a society that encourages and champions the understanding that success has everything to do with amassing and acquiring and enlarging, it is not always easy to find our way as people of faith to that other realm, that other way of living out our lives, that has to do with, as Jesus put it, “being rich towards God.” But it is possible. It is possible. We have company; those who have found a way to live in such separate abundance.

I want to suggest a few ways that we can navigate our way to that lifestyle. The first I’m borrowing from Ken and Tracy Burger. Years ago a friend shared with her an idea that she and Ken have used as something of a plumb line for helping them decide on how to spend time on a weekend or whether to make a certain purchase—all of those value questions that have to do with our resources of time and money. She says, “We ask the question, ‘Are we about collecting stuff, as a family, or collecting experiences as a family?’ Is it going to be stuff or is it going to be experiences?”

Now, obviously, we need some stuff, don’t we? I don’t want any of you going to the grocery store and at the end of your shopping trip walking out with an empty cart, saying “I think we’re going to go with experiences this week rather than milk

and eggs.” We need some stuff, which is why the walk of faith is so precarious and requires such discernment and listening for the Spirit. Obviously, we are consumers by nature. God made us with appetites, and these can be a good and rich and fulfilling dimension of our lives. But the plumb line can be useful in putting those appetites in perspective. Stuff or experiences? Ask that question and see if it nudges you one way or the other in a way that could be instructive.

Secondly, check your thesaurus. “Thesaurus” is simply another word, from Greek and Latin, for “treasure.” As you know, a thesaurus is a book that gives us *extra* words for the original word. And that is by definition what treasure is – treasure is anything that is above and beyond what I need. What we need. By definition, if I have a second of something, or a third or fourth or fifth, then it becomes treasure, whether it’s a pair of shoes or a shirt or a coat or a car or whatever it is. Treasure is the surplus. Check your thesaurus to be sure that the ledger of treasure is long on the spiritual side – time for prayer, time for reading the Psalms or the Bible or other spiritual writers, time in small groups, time in serving the church, time in giving and sharing your wealth in the church’s ministry and in the Kingdom work. Be sure that side of the ledger grows long in your thesaurus. The doubling up on the spiritual side—synonyms of the Spirit, we might say. And be careful that the list of duplicated material things is a shorter list. Check your thesaurus from time to time. Finally, consider a smaller barn. Let me say that a different way: Join me in considering a smaller barn. I’m really considering not buying that cute little storage building that reminds me of a barn, and Luke 12 is one of the reasons why. There’s a phrase that is standard equipment for every person of faith living in an era of affluence and material abundance: “I don’t need that.” When used properly, there’s extraordinary power in that phrase, power to utterly disarm an enticement. Consider a smaller barn, or at least consider staying with the size of barn that you have now.

These are not easy things, and I wrestle with them right alongside you. But they are the challenge of this Nazarene who tells us a story whose central antagonist could be me. We want to find our way to that separate abundance that frees us from feeling that our whole lives are about the expansion of our territory. We want to move to a place where we can say and mean, “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee. Take my hands, my feet, my heart, my love, my silver and my gold.”

By the end of his life, John Wesley was no longer a stranger to that “something” in religion which the porter knew. On his deathbed at 87, he had covered 150,000

miles, sharing the Gospel – in preaching, in intervention with social injustice, working for health care and education and with coal miners and their families – all manner of things that were social issues of his time, bringing the good news of God’s love to people who had never heard it. A hundred and fifty thousand miles – that’s to the moon and back and then around the globe once – on horseback! He had preached forty thousand sermons. He had earned millions of dollars on his books and publications, and died with four pounds to his name, because he also gave all of those millions of dollars away. In the course of his life, he wrote a prayer that is still ours today. It is a prayer that belies a certain holy indifference, a separate source of abundance unrelated to coats, barns, status, gold. “Lord, I am no longer mine, I am Thine. Put me to what Thou wilt. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I fully and heartily give my soul.” He wasn’t a stranger anymore, was he, to that something in religion? He was a good friend.

I don’t want to be a stranger, either, nor do I wish for any of us to be. I want us together to be encountered by that something in religion, those words of Jesus, so that we will never need to discover ourselves expanding into miniature status. Instead, we will be in a place where we draw from a certain abundance that is always more enlarging of our hearts, our giving, our contentedness, our peace, our generosity toward God. Because the moment will come, whether it is this moment or later in the hour or later in the day or next week – the moment will come and it will come again and again, the moment in which something important will be required of you and of me. And when it does, I want us to be ready.