

Luke 12: 13-21

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

August 3, 2025 (Founders' Day)

The Rev. Katherine Bush

When I was a school chaplain, I mostly taught typical religious curricula in the high school: Bible, World Religions, and such. But every winter, I spent a few months with the sixth-graders, co-teaching a catch-all life skills class with the Middle School counselor. We covered a lot of topics quickly: study habits, friendship issues, and every year we spent one full week teaching tone of voice. Now, you might initially not think that tone of voice is a life skill, and while these were classrooms of girls, be assured that we were not teaching them to tone their voices down, nor work on their vocal fry. Rather, we were hoping to teach them the essential difference between saying "where have you been" and "where have you been?" "What is going on with you" or "what is going on with you?" It actually is a life skill: the cultivation of curiosity instead of judgment.

Now, sometimes judgment is warranted, though not nearly as often as some teenagers think. And even when discernment leads to approving or disapproving of someone's choices, the tone of voice with which we offer that judgment still matters. I was on the receiving end of lessons about tone of voice in seminary, when we were put through our paces in a week-long class officially called "Oral Interpretation of Scripture," which was to teach us how to read scripture aloud in worship settings. A very ornery retired minister taught this class, and you may or may not be surprised to learn that we called the class "Read and Bleed." This man never hesitated to stop you mid-syllable and correct and critique your pronunciation and your tone of voice. His favorite text to have us practice with was from the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians, "you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?" Now, there's some judgment!

So, with all of this as background, I was caught up some years ago listening to Fred Craddock - no relation to our Craddocks - preach on this particular parable about the man with his barns. Fred Craddock was a brilliant Biblical scholar and preacher from rural Tennessee, and he lived in a small Appalachian town when he wasn't on faculty at Emory University. As such, you might imagine that his voice and accent were quite distinctive. And as he retold the story about the rich man and the silos and the grain, you knew he knew from farming. But then, when he got to the part where God interrupts the man with his building plan, Fred Craddock almost whispered, ever so gently, "get it straight, before the voice comes to your house and says *'you fool, tonight, tonight.'*" Judgment, yet so gently delivered, it felt like an invitation.

There is judgment in this story, no way around it. Jesus has something to say to us about accumulation and hoarding. But Jesus, who has just disclaimed his role as judge or arbitrator of family estates, wants us to keep listening and so makes his own decision to deliver this message about greed as a story, not as a finger-wag; his own way of modulating his voice.

Among Jesus' stories, this one is not ambiguous; no one needs to sidle up afterwards to ask him what it means. It's pretty clear. "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Notice, though, that while the man is wealthy, he is not a villain. He has not mistreated any tenants, nor won his riches by cheating or graft. The land produced, and he benefited. He is not malicious, but he is foolish. And we see this even before that tell-tale word is used. Did you notice how he talks to himself, "what should I do?" And then in accordance with the old punchline, it's no harm talking to yourself, just be careful answering, he answers: "I'll pull these barns down and build larger ones." And then he keeps going, chatting with his own soul, "soul, you have everything you need," and finally, he famously advises himself to, "eat, drink, and be merry."

Our main character has strong main-character energy, as the kids say. He believes himself to be the only player in the story, and that his own voice is the only one worth listening to. And this is foolish. He doesn't look around at all at his fields and neighbors. If he did, he'd certainly see the constant need, and perhaps recall that one way to deal with abundance is to share. There is, after all, a biblical command to intentionally leave some grain behind for gleaning by widows and orphans. And he consults no one but his own voice, holding an entire conversation in his own head. No asking for advice, or wondering about how his riches might benefit the community. And no prayer, no consideration, no curiosity about how God might view this situation. Again, he's not presented as evil, just very near-sighted and irresponsible, in the sense that he has forgotten he is responsible for his neighbors and to God. What he has is the desire to pile it up for the sake of piling it up. But then, "Get it straight, before the voice comes to your house and says, 'you fool, tonight.'" Judgment, but delivered to this foolish man as an invitation. An invitation to consider the brevity of his life and the pointless project of accumulation.

It's an interesting time to read this story about bigger barns. Today, when we celebrate 193 years of this building, in this season when we continue to celebrate the fruits of a building campaign. It's right, I think, to feel the twinge of recognition in this story, whether here at Calvary or in our own homes. When we look around at all that we have, and when all of us, no matter the size of our accounts, move around in that world which tells us that our lives do "consist in the abundance of possessions." Buy more, upgrade, get the newest edition. The tone of judgment is there, and there's not a lot of working around it. This story is not unclear. "Get it straight, before the voice comes to your house and says, 'you fool, tonight.'" Jesus is clear, not this time about malice, but about foolishness. Did you think all this stuff would make you happy? Do you believe that bigger barns will fill the hole?

Almost two hundred years ago, some people on the banks of the Mississippi River thought that it would be a good idea to build a church, and the story is that from a group of about a dozen folks, they envisioned and designed a building that would seat almost six hundred people for a city, at that time, of 1700. I'll give you a moment to do the math. This was optimism bordering on absurdity. Surely, some looked upon their efforts as foolish. If I can look back on them with curiosity, though, I see an intention not to amass treasure but to share their abundance. Visible here today. This place wasn't built for hoarding; it was built for generosity. Surely, we've hit that mark and missed that mark over the years. In our most recent work, we've made this place wider, brighter, more accessible, so that we are more ready to share communion and aid and hope and love. The walls and hallways themselves have shifted their tone from "good luck finding your way" to "we're so glad you're here." And we continue to reshape our hearts to align with this more generous spirit.

And this is a lesson we can learn here from this story and from this place in which we hear it; this is a lesson we can carry from this church into our lives. "What should I do," with all that I have? What will you do with your crops or with your money or with your talent or with your courage or with your wisdom or with your time? There are decisions to be made; this is actually the essence of judgment: an invitation to decide, to discern, to make choices about the size of our barns - which is to say the size of our lives.

This is the gentle or not-so-gentle judgment of Jesus. What good is all this stuff piled up in your rented storage unit? Are you still talking to yourself and addressing your own soul rather than listening to the need of your neighbors and the voice of God? Why always bigger barns instead of bigger tables? However we hear these stories, however harsh or soft the tone of voice is in this gospel parable, the questions hang in the air. The invitation wants an answer. Waiting for you and me to decide, to judge. In our foolishness, we keep thinking the answer is to store up ample goods for ourselves, when the abundance is always intended to be shared. "Get it straight, before the voice comes to your house and says, 'you fool, tonight.'"