Jesus on Estate Planning
Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21
August 12, 2007

Last week in the comic strip, *Pearls Before Swine*, Pig says, "What are you doing, Rat?" Dressed in a cape with a capital E on his chest, Rat answers, "Behold! I am Ego-Man." Pig asks, "You're a superhero?" Rat answers, "Yes, but with a unique approach to helping others." Pig asks, "Which is?" Rat replies, "I don't." Pig winces in anguish, "Oh, Lord." Rat announces, "Ego-Man: Defender of only himself."[1]

Ego-Man sounds like the rich man in Jesus' parable. As he plans his strategy to build bigger barns and amass his great fortune, he considers only himself. He uses only the first-person pronouns, "I" and "my." Never does he think of anyone else. He is only concerned with his own self-sufficiency and security. And yet even his vast accumulation of wealth does not save him from death; it does not provide the ultimate security after all.

This is Jesus' illustration for his statement, "Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." In *The Message* Eugene Peterson translates that line like this: "Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."

Underlying greed is a yearning to grasp more than is needed. Jesus warns us that meaning of life is not found in the possessions we accumulate. According to Jesus, "the one who dies with the most toys" does not necessarily win what is truly valuable in life. This message is so counter to our mainstream culture that it is often difficult for us to acknowledge, let alone embrace. We are bombarded with advertisements enticing us to find happiness in a multitude of material products, all of which only offer temporary contentment.

In the face of the great temptation to amass more and more stuff, with the ease of leasing a storage unit (a bigger barn!) in which to accumulate more stuff, how do we keep our perspective? What is enough? What investments are we called to make? How are we called to use the gifts and wealth entrusted to us?

The man's mistake is not that he owns great wealth, but that he falsely estimates the value of these blessings and he trusts in their capacity to bring him endless happiness and security. He doesn't realize the emptiness of a solely materialistic life-style. In his self-sufficiency, he isolates himself from friendships and relationships that provide a different kind of wealth. Proudly thinking that he can make it on his own, he finds himself without a community of support and the security of love. His greed prohibits generosity. He thinks only of himself; he never considers what he might be able to do for others in need. Instead of building bigger barns for himself, he could have gone down the road and built a barn for a neighbor in need. Instead he misses a unique opportunity to extend the circle of concern in ways meaningful to himself and to others.

In a recent article on the Christian vision of the good life, Ellen Charry writes, "Goodness and happiness cannot ultimately be separated, for it is by doing good that we experience true pleasure….Happiness comes as we find ourselves and those around us flourishing because we have enhanced their well-being."[2]

Enhancing well-being, making whole, saving life – that was the mission of Jesus and in his life we find direction for our own. Jesus encourages us to be "rich toward God." Peterson says, "fill your barn, not with Self, but with God." The idea of being rich toward God implies ongoing action, doing good, using our resources in ways consistent with God's desires. In this way we design our spiritual estate, which reaps benefits in this life, as well as the life beyond.

In planning our spiritual estate, Jesus offers three pieces of advice. First, guard against greed. The opposite of greed is generosity. The ability to be generous is an indication that we recognize that everything we have ultimately is on loan from God.

Harry Denman, who for many years was the executive of the Methodist Board of Evangelism, came back from one of his trips to India and found himself detained by the U.S. Customs officials. The officials were suspicious of any American tourist returning from abroad with no more luggage than a brown paper bag containing a comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, razor, and shaving cream. But Denman, who lived a simple life, had given away to the people of India everything else that he packed in his suitcase for the trip. He even gave away his suitcase. Denman was fond of quoting Chesterton, "There are two ways to get enough in this world: one is to accumulate more. The other is to desire less."[3]

Life is not defined by what we have, but by the goodness of our living. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. More important than possessions is the character of one's life and the quality of our relationships. Contentment in life is found in investing ourselves in honest, loving relationships with others. That's Jesus' second recommendation.

John Patton shares that during the last months before his mother's death, frequently their conversations began with his saying, "I want to tell you about your investments." They had talked about where the money supporting her had come from, but the focus of these conversations was upon her investments in persons. He told her what was happening with her grandchildren and with other people she had loved and invested herself in, how her investment in them was being played out in their lives. As her own life diminished, her son made her aware that her most important securities—those whom she loved--were doing pretty well.[4]

What more can we do to invest in and strengthen the love in our lives?

Jesus' final advice is to be rich toward God. When we seek security elsewhere, we will not find the deeper joy from knowing the security of God's love. In eighteenth century England, John Wesley preached that people should neither desire to be rich, endeavor to be rich, store up treasures, possess more goods than God wills (more than is needed for food and covering), nor love money.[5] In the same sermon he repeated one of his dominant themes: gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. In later life, Wesley worried that people had heeded his earlier teachings about earning and saving, but not his teachings about giving. He repeatedly preached that having riches inevitably leads to trusting riches, which hinders people from loving God and neighbor.[6] People store wealth for the future neglecting to love God and neighbor in the present.

In the end, we don't own anything anyway. We find greater security in knowing that we belong to God than in knowing that we own a bigger barn. Ellen Charry says, "Happiness is a life nourished by the love and goodness of God that contributes to the flourishing of creation. Even in the face of evil, rejection and suffering, a person who has learned to love well will experience pleasure and satisfaction from being herself—a person built from the loving use of God-given creativity, power and goodness. When that goodness takes up residence in us, we realize that we are the living image of God, and that makes us happy."

Day Two of The Adventures of Ego-Man, Defender of Only Himself. While flying nonchalantly through the air, he hears a cry for help: "Help! Help! I'm being mugged!" Ego-Man lands on the ground to check out the situation. A bandit has a man at gun-point. The victim shouts, "Ego-Man! Save Me! I'm being mugged!" With hands on hips, Ego-Man asks, "Yes, but how does this affect *me*?" The poor victim responds, "I guess it doesn't." In the last scene Ego-Man is seen flying off into the air, having declined yet another opportunity to grow rich toward God and neighbor.[7]

My friends, may we choose to make wise investments of our time, money, and resources in relationships that make us rich toward God and one another. Amen.

[1] Stephan Pastis, "Pearls Before Swine," United Feature Syndicate Inc., 2007, *Contra Costa Times*, August 9, 2007, p. B8.
[2] Ellen T. Charry, "Happy pursuits: A Christian vision of the good life," *Christian Century,* July 24, 2007, pp. 31-32.
[3] Rev. Don Shelby, First United Methodist Church, Santa Monica, July 30, 1989.
[4] *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XII, No. 9, August 2001, p. 3.
[5] John Wesley, Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches."
[6] John Wesley, Sermon 108, "On Riches."
[7] Stephan Pastis, ibid, August 10, 2007, p. F8.

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