

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“BARNES AND (SOMETIMES) NOBLE”

July 25, 2010

TEXT: Luke 12:13-21

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This is a story about barns and people who are sometimes noble. Barns and noble. Not the book store, but the Book of Luke, where Jesus introduces a rich man. I like to call him Mr. Barns, because he has a barn problem. His land is productive. His crops are flourishing. His barns are overfilled. And so he sits down, being a good businessman, and he says in verse 17: “What should I do? For I have no place to store my crops.”

It’s kind of like saying: “What should I do? I have five cars for my three-car garage.” Or it’s like saying: “What should I do? I have 20 people on my guest list for the Stanley Cup playoffs in Chicago, but I only have room for 12 in my luxury suite.”

We don’t have much sympathy for Mr. Barns. He thinks he has a problem because his barns are too small. But in reality he has a heart problem. His heart is too small, like the Grinch in the story by Dr. Seuss.

What Jesus is saying is that Mr. Barns is not a fortunate man. He has a fortune, but he is not fortunate. He keeps all of his wealth for himself, which means that he is a spiritual infant. “It’s all about me” – that’s the definition of spiritual babyhood. And Mr. Barns, unfortunately, is clueless.

Notice the pronouns in his soliloquy: “What should I (one) do, for I (two) have no place to store my (three) crops? I (four) will do this: I (five) will pull down my (six) barns and build larger ones, and I (seven) will say to my (eight) soul, Soul, you (nine) have ample goods laid up for many years.” There are nine pronouns. Eight of them are first person pronouns: “I,” “my.” One is a second person pronoun: “you.” But the “you” refers to his own soul. He is talking to himself. And so his little speech is 100% self-centered. Mr. Barns is a tragic man. It never occurs to him to use his superabundant harvest to feed hungry neighbors. It never occurs to him that he is playing a foolish game: “Whoever has the most toys when he dies wins.” What does Jesus say about people like Mr. Barns? He simply asks: “What does it profit [you] if you gain the whole world and lose or forfeit [yourself]?” (Luke 9:25). Or as I heard someone say recently: “What does it profit you if you are the richest person in the cemetery?”

Abraham Lincoln once said that greed is our most basic problem. We are like two boys who have three marbles. They begin to fight to see who gets the extra marble. “I want to have two marbles,” says one. “No,” says the other, “I want two marbles.” Neither of them says: “I can have one; you can have one; then we’ll have one to share with each other or with a friend who has none.” They keep fighting until they prove that they are in spiritual babyhood.

Do you remember why Jesus is telling this story about Mr. Barns? The occasion is a fight. In verse 13 someone in the crowd says, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance

with me.” It’s the younger brother speaking, the one who receives a smaller inheritance. His mantra is familiar: “It’s not fair.” Instead of appreciating what he does have, he complains because someone else has more. He doesn’t know how to be content. John D. Rockefeller was asked: “How much money does it take, Mr. Rockefeller, to be happy?” He replied: “Just a little more.”

But there is good news today. Money in the Bible is not evil. The Bible says: “The *love* of money is the root of all evil” (I Timothy 6:10). The obsessions with money is the problem. When we shift the pronouns from “I” to “you,” from “my” to “our,” we find that God not only loves a cheerful giver (II Corinthians 9:7). God also makes givers cheerful. It’s fun to give to God’s favorite charity. Do you know what that is? God’s favorite charity, I believe, is the human race and the world that God has created.

Let me say it in a different way. Money in the Bible can be a blessing and a joy, a sign of God’s favor. It can also be a danger, a toil, and a snare. The secret is to keep our pronouns straight. When we ask God, “How can I use the gift of money to serve you?” we become like the “new Mr. Grinch,” whose heart grew three sizes in one day.

If you happen to be a Muslim, you are required to give 2 ½ per cent of all you own to charity. For us as Christians, I hope we can do better than that, because we do believe that our barns can be noble. We do believe that our abundant crops can bring abundant joy – to us and to others. We do believe that money well used can help us grow spiritually.

Mr. Barns put his trust in material goods. He was surprised when God said to him: “How foolish! This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

What can we learn from his story? We can learn to be like the teenagers in a church parking lot down South. They looked awful. They looked like something the cats would drag in. They were in bad shape, ten or twelve of them with bed rolls, waiting for their parents to pick them up. Someone saw them and wanted to know: “What is this?” One of the teenagers explained: “We just got back from a mission trip. We worked with poor people who have nothing.” The question was asked: “Are you tired?” “You better believe it,” came the reply. Then the young teenager added seven life-changing words: “It’s the best tired I’ve ever felt.”

I hope that all of us in the church can have a profound experience of giving and serving. It’s what we call joy, the kind of joy that Mr. Barns knew nothing about. It comes from giving our time, our energy, and our material blessings for the benefit of God’s favorite charity. And when that happens, our barns become noble.