

Is Your Barn Big Enough?

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Sermon for Sunday, August 29, 2010, Luke 12:13-21

I guess you know you are getting older when you can think of all sorts of old expressions that make perfect sense to you, but no sense at all to anyone under 18. Take, for example, the expression, Drop a dime. It refers to an informant alerting police to criminal behavior by calling on a payphone. You dropped a dime in the slot to pay for the call. Nowadays, you'd be lucky to find a payphone in the first place, and if you did, it would take considerably more than a dime to make the call.

Or how about, You sound like a broken record? My wife said that to one of her students a while back and the kid just stared at her. He had no idea what she was talking about. Records were the things you used to listen to, before there were Ipods, CDs, cassettes or 8 track players. And when a record had a big scratch, it would skip and often repeat the same two seconds of the song over and over and over. So if you kept harping on a subject, people would say, You sound like a broken record.

And how about this one: Were you born in a barn? That is what they used to say if you would forget to close the door when you entered or exited a house. I guess the idea was that people often left barn doors open because barns weren't heated or cooled, and the flies got in anyway. One of my favorite stories from childhood is about the time someone said to my brother, Hey, were you born in a barn? and he answered, No, but Jesus was. Everyone laughed.

Speaking of barns, have you noticed there aren't as many as there used to be? Experts estimate that the number of barns in the U.S. is down by more than two-thirds from a century ago. And more are being torn down (or just falling down) every year. Several organizations have been formed to help preserve important older barns, but they admit they are losing the battle.

Barns, a rural cultural icon some call the prairie cathedral, are disappearing for several reasons. Old barns can be expensive to maintain, and when they are fixed up, the result can be higher taxes. But the biggest reason barns are disappearing especially in the Midwest is that they no longer serve a practical purpose. Most barns were built for farms that worked primarily with livestock, especially cows and draft horses. Many farms now are devoted solely to raising grain, and the old barns aren't even useful for storing the combines and tractors. The equipment is so large, it won't fit through the barn door!

If the trend continues, a few generations from now, the text we read this morning might be one of those things that doesn't make sense to many people. In our text, a man approaches Jesus and asks for help settling an inheritance dispute. Jesus declines, and as a kind of explanation for his refusal, he tells a story about a rich man who, after a particularly abundant harvest, made plans to build bigger barns to store the crop and then live in luxury off the excess.

This is an interesting text for a number of reasons. The first, not to be overlooked, is that someone asks for help and Jesus refuses to give it. How hard would it have been for Jesus to take a few minutes and try to mediate some kind of agreement? Perhaps the man had a legitimate gripe against his brother. Nothing in the text suggests otherwise. And even if he didn't, one might think that Jesus would be in favor of trying to achieve some kind of reconciliation between brothers.

But rather than offer to help, Jesus responds with a warning: Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. And to reinforce his point, Jesus then proceeds to tell the story about the rich man and his barns. But what, exactly, is this story meant to tell us? To find out, let's take a closer look.

The story is about a man who is already rich. After all, he owns multiple barns. And he is a landowner, which at the time usually meant he was at least among the top 5% of the population in wealth. He is already well-off, comfortable, certainly not in need.

Now, my grandfather, who was a farmer, said he always figured on a kind of four-year cycle. In any four years, he said, he counted on one bad year, two so-so years, and one good year. Wise management consisted of setting aside what you got in the good year to get you through the next bad year.

The farmer in the text, however, didn't just have a good year. He had a great year, a truly extraordinary year so good that his current storage facilities (barns) couldn't hold it all. But, he reasoned, if he could expand his storage capacity, he could be set for life (or at least for many years to come). In modern terms, what we are talking about is early retirement. The crop was so abundant, he figured he was set for life.

What he didn't figure on was how brief that life might be. Just as he had finished making plans for those bigger barns and had begun daydreaming about the good life he was going to live, God spoke: You fool, said God, This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? Jesus concludes the lesson with these words, So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God.

The story Jesus told was not just for the fellow who wanted help getting the inheritance settled. It was -- and is -- for us all. It is a lesson about how wisdom is derived from remembering that we are mortal and life is fragile. It is a lesson about remembering that the things which matter most are not the things which require great wealth. And, above all, it is a lesson about blessings, and what it means to be blessed in this life.

The rich man was blessed with an abundant harvest, and how did he respond? Did he praise God? No. Did he think of his needy neighbors, or perhaps sharing some of the excess with his field hands? No. What he does is think about himself. In the little speech he makes, just a couple of sentences, he uses the words I and my ten times. It is no secret where his focus lies. He never stops to ask, Why am I so blessed? He thinks he knows the answer so he can relax, eat, drink and be merry.

It's not just adversity that reveals our character success can, too. How we handle our blessings can reveal who we really are. It shows what our priorities are. The priority of the rich man in Jesus' story is pretty obvious: his priority was himself. His strategy was to build bigger barns.

He had other choices. So do we. After all, most of us are blessed with an abundance of money and material resources. Some of us are blessed more than others, it's true. But most of us have more than we need and plenty enough to share. So what is our answer to the question, Why am I so blessed?

I consider that the great neglected question of our era. Let some great tragedy strike, and everyone is asking why why must I suffer, why is this happening to me? But when good things happen, no one bothers to ask why. They just start making plans to enjoy themselves, like the rich man in our text. Not many are building bigger barns anymore, but plenty of people

who come into money build bigger houses, or buy bigger boats and fancier cars. They go on fancier vacations. They eat at finer restaurants.

Of course, you don't have to be rich to be selfish. By the same token, you don't have to be rich to be generous. All you have to have is something you are able to give that someone else needs—money, naturally, but also time, energy, wisdom, patience, understanding or love. If you have more than you need, then you are blessed, and if you are blessed, it is so that you can be a blessing to others. That's the answer to the question, "Why am I so blessed?" The answer is, so you can be a blessing in the life of another—so you can share.

In the book of Acts, written by the same author as our text for this morning, there is a memorable story about Peter and John shortly after the resurrection. While they were on their way to the Temple, they pass by a lame man who asked them for alms. Peter and John stopped. What makes this story memorable for me is how Peter replied to the man's request. Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have, I give. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And we are told the man did stand up and was healed.

What I like most about this story is that Peter didn't let the fact that he had no silver or gold become an excuse. Instead of focusing on what he didn't have, he focused on what he did. He found a way to be generous. He used a blessing he had received—the power of the Holy Spirit—to provide a blessing to someone else.

The rich man in our text thought he had life all figured out, but he didn't have the first clue. Life is about loving, giving and being part of the work God is doing in the world. When God gives us more than we need, it isn't so we can build bigger barns. It is so we can share, and have the joy and the honor of playing a part in the Kingdom of God.

Amen.