

## SUNDAY SERMON ON LUKE 12:13–21

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There is no point in telling Jesus what to say, what to say to others. Two chapters before our text, Jesus visits two sisters, and one plants herself squarely in front of him: ... "tell my sister ..." Here are two brothers who also do not live very harmoniously together: ... "tell my brother ... ". Jesus reacts angrily: "Man, who set me up as a judge over you?" It is not the bluntness of this question that is disturbing, but its content, for we actually do believe that God set his Son up to judge us, in this connection also hoping that the Son of Man, who suffered our inhumanity in his own body, may be a more human, merciful judge: one who will set the wrong and mad world right.

But that's exactly why he can't be harnessed, forced in front of our carts, nor instrumentalised. Those who know precisely what Jesus should say, what he should say to others – and we're familiar with intercessory prayers, in which God is also asked to make something clear to others that has long been clear to us – they are not at all curious, as is to be expected, about what he really says. Jesus prefers to say what he has to say himself and in his own words. He does the same in our story and, we hope, he does the same here and now.

The case of the two sisters relates to the sharing of work, whilst here the story of the two brothers deals with the sharing of an inheritance. This sounds like what we are trying to do here in Bible Week: sharing our heritage. All participants, not just the resource persons, bring old and new things out of their treasuries to share with others. Of course, the word "sharing" has taken on a new meaning in the age of supposedly social, but often completely anti-social media. Those who *share* something suffer no loss, contributing nothing of their own for the benefit of others, but instead organize and experience a wondrous increase in their communicative activity. In material terms, however, it remains the case that whoever shares with others gives away something of their own. This is shown by the discussions about what needs to be done when many people can no longer afford electricity, heating and, increasingly, food.

Jesus warns against greed, and we heard earlier in the letter to the Colossians that greed is idolatry. This explains the alarmed and alarming tone of the warning. Watch! Beware! That doesn't sound like the enlightened and prudent wisdom of an unworldly, escapist ascetic. Jesus knows the danger we face from a mighty power, an anti-god. In his *Great Catechism*, Martin Luther defined that which is most important to us in our life as God: a God means that one should be prepared for everything that is good and find refuge in all times of trouble. There are many who think they have God and enough of everything – if they have money and possessions – such that they are utterly reliant on this and boast about it with such confidence and rigidity that they couldn't care less about anyone else. They also have a god – called Mammon, meaning money and goods, to whom they dedicate their hearts. This, Luther opined some five hundred years ago, is the most widely believed-in god.

Is there such a thing as mental and spiritual greed? I'm always slightly taken aback when Christians assure us that talking to Jews has by no means shaken their faith, but rather enriched it. Enriched? Recently the New Testament scholar Peter von der Osten-Sacken died: like few others in his profession he took part very fully in Christian-Jewish dialogue. One of his early insights in this conversation immediately made him both renowned and notorious. He demanded that Christians and churches should engage in "a renunciation of Christological ownership". Now, I'm not sure if Christology is something one owns. It is precisely here that Jesus himself eludes being owned – and not only here. However, the violent reaction to Osten-Sacken showed that he had hit a point which was perhaps sore point yet is also the salient point. This applies to the Christian inheritance: gathering things has its time, as does discarding things. The observation of Jesus: "No one has life from his possessions" in any case covers both spiritual and material property. And these two types of possession cannot anyway be separated from each other here in a country in which the heirs of those who profited from "Aryanization" (of either kind of property) live next to those whose forebears had everything taken from them.

When Jesus warns against greed, he not only speaks as a prophet fighting idolatry, but he also speaks as a pastor, one who takes care of souls. He tells a story in which "soul" is the main word. He doesn't say which of the brothers it is for, he recounts it to everyone – including us.

A rich man's land is productive – that is the biblical definition of blessing. Yet the rich man is not rich in relationships with other people, but instead lonely. For lack of other people to talk to, he talks to himself, asking himself: what should I do? and answering himself: this is what I want to do. Even if a good harvest literally appears to represent the pure fruits of nature, pure processes of nature are not the only things that have taken place; and so it is with harvests of a social nature – no one brings these about all alone, but instead many have worked to create them. So this story is also about what, long after Jesus, another great son of his people called the contradiction between social production and private appropriation. This is shown by the fact that he not only talks about grain, but also about goods, about wares, about commodities. That's why he needs new, larger barns so that he can afford not to sell until he can get a good price. Then he will say to his soul, as he announces another soliloquy: dear soul, you have possessed many goods for many years; now allow yourself rest, eat, drink, and be merry. In biblical terms there can be no objection to exhorting ourselves to eat, drink and be merry. After this list in Ecclesiastes, explaining that everything has its time, it says: then I realized that there is nothing better than to be glad and enjoy a good life. For if a person is able to eat and drink and have good courage in dealing with the tasks of life, this is a gift from God.

And so the conversation with one's own soul could also be thought of differently, for example: praise the ETERNAL ONE, my soul, and may all that is in me exalt God's holy name; praise the LORD, my soul, and do not forget all the good that God has done for you. Here, however, it is the privately acquired goods which in eschatological terms promise the rich their eternal rest – their souls have forgotten, and will continue to forget, all the good that the ETERNAL has done for them. But that doesn't work, because the one who has been forgotten and ignored raises his voice and asks to be heard, and the conversation then ceases to be the soliloquy of the individual.

You fool, says God, and this word has a very different meaning in the Bible than it does today, a more serious one. Of course, those who do not find what is considered folly and foolishness in the Rhineland and other countries far away from Berlin to be as spectacularly hilarious as those involved nevertheless do appear to find something amusing and harmless in such terms, and we are all likewise aware that in Shakespeare's plays and perhaps in reality, too, there are court jesters who are individuals who, cunningly and deviously masked, tell the truth to those sitting on the throne. And in any case we cannot withhold our sympathy from those who create entertaining follies or who are fools for love.

But it's different in the Bible. The fools, the foolish ones, are those who say in their hearts: there is no God, and act foolishly accordingly. In the Bible, this is not regarded as some sort of especially perceptive enlightened point of view, but as ignorance, because an important aspect of all reality is ignored and deliberately disregarded; it's unrealistic, illusionary, stupid. Karl Barth therefore called stupidity a basic form of sin.

Instead of heavenly rest in eternal light, God announces a dark night and takes up the word *soul*: in this night your soul will be asked of you. God thus draws the rich man's attention to the fact that we all have to die and do not know when we will die, in order to make a wise man out of a stupid man: one who learns to count his days and thus acquires a heart of wisdom. God does not say who will demand this person's soul: whether it may in fact be God, or whether the exploited push him or her out of the way and then turn private wealth into public property. In any case, God brings other interested parties into play, suggesting a change of ownership in the form of a question: these things which you have laid out for all to see – to whom will they belong?

Jesus comments on his story: So it is with the one who lays up treasure and is not rich with God. He contrasts the wealth of the private investor with another wealth. Rich with God – of course that doesn't mean that we can deposit a kind of credit with our actions with God, from which we can then, let's say, derive profit at some later date in order to enjoy ourselves in the future. That would be the eschatology of the rich but foolish man expanded into the metaphysical realm. Rich with God – we can also translate: rich in God. This means: rich in relationships. For God, this God, is a relational being. Already in the first chapter of the Bible we learn that a single individual is not yet the image and likeness of God – for this, we must wait for man and woman, man and fellow man, the community of different human beings. It is good for us when our soliloquy – and that can also be a collective soliloquy – is interrupted, even if, perhaps precisely when, this disturbs and upsets us. In our story, God takes the step of becoming the voice of those who in the conventional order of things do not get a chance to speak in the rich man's soliloquy. Conversely, God's voice can be heard in the interventions and objections of those fellow human beings who appear to be interrupting. And so – maybe they're right, those fellow Christian who cause me to feel taken aback when they speak of their faith being enriched by the experience of engaging in dialogue with Jews? It just depends on whether it's a matter of spiritual greed, of collecting treasures, of scooping up shiny baubles. We heard the lamentation of Kohelet: there are people who labour hard for wisdom and knowledge, and then they have to surrender what has been so laboriously worked for to the others, or at least give them a share of it, - these others who have never bothered to work for it. This is *hevel*, says Kohelet: pure futility, senseless, absurd. Only if we work together will we become rich with God. Then we will rejoice together before God, as one rejoices in the harvest, as one rejoices in the distribution of gains and winnings – that is, in sharing.

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