

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—4Aug19
Lk. 12
“Fool’s Gold”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

As I prepare for retirement, I have been reading articles in the papers and on line that give *retirement advice*. I want to know how to prepare to stop work and adopt a new, more leisurely style of life.

Unfortunately, today’s Gospel lesson *doesn’t* seem to be helpful to someone who is contemplating retirement!

In the story, Jesus is talking to a crowd of people, and someone in the crowd asks Jesus to support him in a dispute he has with his brother over a family inheritance.

Jesus first refuses to be a “judge or arbitrator” in this family dispute. But then he makes a more general point about life. “Take care!” he says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Jesus illustrates his claim by telling a parable about a rich man. The man is so rich that his fields are producing more grain than he can store. Facing this abundance, the man decides to tear down his old barns and build new ones. That way, he will have enough space for all his grain as well as for his other possessions.

The man is very pleased with his plan. If he builds the barns, the man thinks, then he will be able to say to himself, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

But the story has a far-from-happy ending. God says to the man, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Now, the text isn’t meant to discourage savings! Jesus isn’t saying that we should always spend what we earn. Rather, the parable is a warning about hoarding things--about devoting our lives to accumulating more than we need. In other words, as Jesus notes, it’s a warning about *greed*.

And the parable is also about the problem of self-centeredness. The rich man is entirely focused on himself. He might have chosen to use his wealth to help other people. Instead, he stored up his possessions so that he personally could afford a luxurious retirement.

Jesus didn’t want to be a “judge or arbitrator” who would take it upon himself to manage disputes about money—such as family arguments over inheritances. That wasn’t his role when he was on earth.

But Jesus did teach his followers to have a spiritual perspective on their personal concerns so that they could make the right decisions. The disciples could anticipate, for example, that if they devoted themselves exclusively to making a fortune, that narrow focus would distort how they looked at the other parts of their lives.

As the man in the parable discovered, we can’t be certain of the future. Wealth isn’t forever. The parable vividly reminds us that, as far as material goods are concerned, “You can’t take them with you!”

Material possessions. Then, aren’t an exclusive foundation for life. This is true for people who aren’t rich. We have all known *marriages* that have broken up because one spouse devoted

so much time to making money that the couple lacked the shared time that they needed to nurture their relationship.

In fact, their situation may be similar to the rich man's problem in the parable. The couple sacrifices pleasures in the present in order to make a pile of money for their future—only to find that they have undermined the very marriage that their wealth was meant to support.

Christ's story makes sense. Yet for all the common sense we might apply to our lives, we may find it hard to keep our possessions in perspective.

As the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once observed, we can be possessed by our possessions! We can love our possessions with a decidedly unholy love that ends up robbing us of our freedom.

Or, as another philosopher C. B. McPherson has speculated, Western society tends toward what McPherson calls, "possessive individualism." Like the rich man in the parable, we go our separate ways, reinforcing our individualism by what we can gain in the way of our material things.

Even small possessions can possess us. I have become attached to a thoroughly-unattractive old pair of shoes that should go in the trash.

Or we can simply spend too much time thinking about *things*. Remember the famous claim of St. Paul that "the love of money is the root of all evil."

This is admittedly an exaggeration. There are lots of forms of evil that don't involve the love of money—cruelty, for example.

But by the same token greed can take many forms. I can love *other peoples'* money in that I envy things my friends have that I don't have. I can covet the wealth of other people.

We can also overestimate the control that money seems to give us over the future. A bank account does provide us with some freedom. Bill Gates doesn't have to worry about where his next meal is coming from!

But, as Christ's parable reminds us, life doesn't always go as we expect it to. All the more reason, then, to seize the time!

The parable is a warning. But it's a fair warning. After all, the rich man is fictional; we who are real people have a chance to get our priorities straight.

Of course, I do need to plan for my retirement. I'm leaving my home and job of many years.

Yet even as I fret about the future, I need to do what every Christian tries to do: I need to enjoy the day that the Lord has made. Live in the moment.

If that strategy makes us a little less anxious about the future, so much the better. Living in God's time is good advice, whatever our stage in life.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.