

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
 Luke 12:13-21 *The Parable of the Foolish Intern*

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And she told them this parable: *The land of a certain rich man was oceanfront property just outside of a picturesque village about thirty miles south of downtown Boston. The village with its white clapboard church on the town common, a lush swath of grass complete with a small duck pond was so charming and quintessentially New England-looking that it is sometimes used as a film location for Hollywood movies.*

*The certain rich man, who lived just outside of the village, loved his view of the Atlantic Ocean. The front of his mansion faced east, overlooking the rocky shore and miles and miles of the sea beyond.*

*When the mansion on the land adjacent to the rich man's land came up for sale, the rich man bought it. Then, the rich man had the vast home next door torn down to the ground. When asked by neighbors and towns folks inquiring if the home had been in a such a state of disrepair that it needed to be torn down so a new home could be built, the rich man replied, "No, getting rid of that place really improves my view of the ocean out of the windows on the north side of my house."*

*Upon hearing the news of such gluttonous waste and greed, a young seminary intern serving at that white clapboard church on the picturesque town common approached her supervising minister. She was outraged. She said unto her supervisor, "Gary, how can you stand it here? You grew-up in Ohio, too. Don't you feel like a sell-out being in this town that is so wealthy and full of greedy people? I feel like I need to quit and go serve a church in the inner city. This is ridiculous. I'm going someplace that needs me."*

*The supervising minister took a deep breath, his calmness further infuriating the young intern, and said unto her, "Robin, it seems to me that there isn't anyone more in need of hearing the Gospel than a man who spends millions dollars to improve his view when he already had a spectacular view. There is plenty of ministry to be done here. Plenty of ministry to be done."*

That was twenty-one years ago. Since then I served a church in the third wealthiest town in Rhode Island and now I serve here in Leelanau County, the second wealthiest county in the state of Michigan. During these years of ministry, I have witnessed more than my fair share of the sufferings and tribulations of those who have accumulated wealth and sometimes those sufferings and tribulations are caused by the wealth they have accumulated. That being said, I don't agree with the old adage, "money can't buy happiness." After all, corgis, shoes, black licorice, and stick shift cars all cost money and these are things that bring me a fair amount of happiness. But, as studies show, there is a saturation point. An article from Time magazine summarizes one of these studies.

*According to a [2010] study from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, [money] sort of does [buy happiness] up to about \$75,000 a year. The lower a person's annual income falls below that benchmark, the unhappier he or she feels. But no matter how much more than \$75,000 people make, they don't report any greater degree of happiness.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, in my experience, the worry that comes from having excessive possessions begins to weigh on peoples' souls. When the worry about losing something threatens the joy we feel in having something, I think it's an invitation for us to consider our priorities and possessions, an opportunity for us to wonder about what it looks like to come 'round right when it comes to the role that money and possessions play in our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2019628,00.html>

And that's what so many parts of Luke's gospel, especially the Parable of the Rich Man, invite us to do . . . consider our priorities. Though this is one of the easier to understand parables of Jesus, it can be a hard one for some of us to hear. "I'll work hard, pay into my 401k, get long-term healthcare insurance, and then I'll be set—able to take it easy and eat, drink, and be merry." This sounds like a reasonable, Dave Ramsey-approved plan to me. But how does Jesus respond? He calls the man a fool and explains, "This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

A study of the word "life" in this passage reveals that the Greek word used in the original text was the same word we use for "soul." The difference in meaning could have an impact on how we apply this passage to our own lives. If you'd like to know more about what Jesus may have meant when he said, "This very night your soul will be demanded from you" please ask Rev. McHenry during coffee hour.

Generally speaking, this parable is an invitation to consider the impact of financial wealth on our lives. Most scholars agree it is not an outright condemnation of wealth. But rather, it reminds us that wealth is a tool—like a hammer. A hammer can be used to nail together boards to make a house for someone in need or a hammer can be used to engage in an act of violence. (That this was the first example that popped into my mind as I was writing this sermon reveals that I need to cut back on watching British detective shows, shows in which common household items tend to be the murder weapons, but I digress.) No matter how we use the tool that is our wealth, the parable is clear that it can't save our souls—only God can do that. And so it is that we are called to be, in the words of Jesus, "rich towards God" in our gratitude for the gift of God's grace

Which brings us back to Second Congregational Church on the town common in Cohasset, Massachusetts some twenty-one years ago. (There is a picture of it on this morning's bulletin cover.) I'm glad I stayed. It was there that I first learned of the Appalachia Service Project. In time, that supervising minister Gary Ritts (who helped me to recognize that everyone needs to hear the Good News, even if they are rich) and his wife Judy, helped the people of that wealthy town to channel some of their resources into being rich towards God by serving others in need. During the Ritts' twenty-nine year tenure at Second Congregational, they facilitated over three thousand ASP volunteer opportunities for people in their town.

And now, next spring break, I will be going with youth and adults from our church to ASP where we will attempt to be rich towards God in giving of our time, treasure, and talent to make peoples' homes warmer, safer, and dryer. These youth and adults are facing the unknown, getting out of their comfort zones, and trusting God to guide them. And you, so many of you have already been generous in sharing your wealth to help make this opportunity to possible. You, too, are part of this effort to be rich towards God.

The Parable of the Rich Man reminds us to be careful about how we use the tool that is our wealth. It reminds us of the limits of wealth to save us even as it invites us to be rich towards God by serving and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

### Invitation

And now it is our opportunity to embrace Christ's invitation to gather at this table for a simple meal of bread and the fruit of the vine. It was during that holy meal on the night of his betrayal that Jesus showed us what it was to be rich towards God by serving others when he got up from the table to wash the feet of his disciples. We gather here, as children of God, fortified by Christ's presence and inspired by Christ's example, gathered as brothers and sisters in Christ to celebrate and remember.

This is the feast laid out by us by Jesus Christ. All are welcome and wanted at the table. Let us pray.

### Prayer of the Great Thanksgiving

Loving and Merciful God, Our hearts truly are glad, and we are filled with thankfulness, In Your great love You did not abandon us in the dark and fearful places of this world, But in Jesus, You came to us, to rescue

us, to restore us, and to give us new life. Now, through Christ, all who are tired and burdened, all who are frightened and unsafe, all who are sick and broken, can come and find new life.

As we gather at this table we bring with us gratitude for the wealth of time, talent, and treasure you bestow upon us. We also bring with us regret and confess that there are times when we are greedy with our wealth, misguided with our actions, unkind with our words, negligent in our priorities. Forgive us and bring us round right to you.

We remember the way that Jesus showed us His love: On the evening before He died, He had supper with His friends. During the meal, He took the loaf of bread, gave thanks for it, broke it and then passed it around with these words: This is my body broken for you. Eat this and remember me. And, after the meal he took the fruit of the vine, gave thanks for it and then passed it around with these words: This is my blood shed for you. Drink this and remember me, And now, every time we eat bread like this, and every time we drink wine like this, we remember Jesus, and the gift of everlasting love.

#### Closing Prayer

We thank You for this meal, and for welcoming us to your table. We remember that we are your children, and that you have called us to share your love with everyone we meet. Help us to receive your life, walk in your strength, and follow your ways every moment of our lives. And now, may God's caring arms embrace us, Jesus' comforting words fill us, and the Holy Spirit's renew us.

And now in the silence, we lift to you the prayers of our hearts, souls, and minds.