

# A Different Concept of Abundance

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## **Luke 12: 13-21**

I've been reading some Fred Craddock this summer, one of my favorite preachers and storytellers. He tells this story, a classic Craddock story: "I've never been to the greyhound races, but I've seen them on TV. They have these beautiful, big old dogs – I say beautiful, they're really ugly – and they run that mechanical rabbit around the ring, and these dogs just run, exhausting themselves chasing it. When those dogs get to where they can't race, the owners put a little ad in the paper, and if anybody wants one for a pet, they can have it, otherwise they are going to be destroyed. I have a niece in Arizona who can't stand that ad. She goes and gets them. Big old dogs in the house; she loves them.

I was in a home not long ago where they had adopted a dog that had been a racer. It was a big old greyhound, lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family, just a toddler, was pulling its tail, and a little older kid had his head over on that old dog's stomach...used it for a pillow. That dog just seemed so happy, and I said to the dog, 'Uh, are you still racing any?'

"No, I don't race anymore.'

"I said, 'Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?'

"He said, 'No, no.'

"I said, 'What's the matter? You get too old?'

"No, I still had some race left in me.'

"Well, did you not win?'

"He said, 'I won over a million dollars for my owner.'

"Then what was it...bad treatment?'

"Oh no, they treated us royally when we were racing.'

"I said, 'Then what? Did you get injured?'

"No, no, I'm fine'

"Then what?'

"He said, 'I just quit.'

"You quit? Why did you quit?'

“And he said, ‘I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. And I quit.’ He looked at me and said, ‘All that running and running and running, and what I was chasing was not even real.’”

“For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Or, in the translation of Eugene Peterson, “Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”

“All that running and running and what I was chasing was not even real.”

I recently heard someone say that when you first bring a child to church – or to church camp – that child is disoriented and needs some instruction. But take that same child to Toys R Us, and he or she needs no instruction.

“Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”

Do you hear how radically counter-cultural this familiar text is? Early in July, William Willimon told a number of us preachers that he no longer has patience with people who ask him, often just after church, “Why don’t you and the church ever say something relevant...something that relates to my world?” He told us he no longer fumbles around and tries to make excuses for the church. Instead, he now says: “Why should I even care about your world? I and the Gospel I preach want to destroy your world!” This story told by Jesus, a story we know so well, is one of those world-destroying texts. For it offers an alternative account of who we are and what we are doing here. In the world of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism and markets this text says “This is not the only world.” It dares to proclaim that if you think you can secure your future through the accumulation of wealth; if you think you can control your life through the acquisition of things; if you think this, well my friend, you are a fool.

Jesus is not offering a program on how to make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. There are those who have tried to make Jesus do that sort of thing, but he simply won’t play that game. No, this scripture wants to convert somebody. It wants to put us in a different world. It invites us to worship at an altar different than that of consumption and accumulation; to embrace and allow ourselves to be shaped by a different story...actually this story. We might call that wealthy farmer a prudent, forward-looking, businessman. But God called him...well, a fool. Do you see it? Two worlds are colliding in this text.

Two weeks ago I was just getting ready to begin my week as chaplain for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders at Camp Cazadero. Toward the end of the week at one of our staff meetings I

thanked the counselors and asked them if they realized what a radical, counter-cultural thing they were doing at this church camp. We had these 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders – think of it – no cell phones, no TV's, no video games, no malls, no 24/7 schedules which so many kids have these days. No, at camp they really only had each other, some caring counselors, and this wonderful space we call Camp Cazadero – space where things like relationships, conversation, faith, songs, caring for and listening to each other are encouraged and valued. Some had a lot of trouble with that. One boy made it clear he couldn't wait to get back to his video games and he was never coming again. One boy was being quite disruptive and was finally told mid-week – I sat in on that conversation - that maybe he should be moved to another cabin, another family group. He began to cry and pleaded, "Don't take me from my cabin." Tears were rolling down his face. It was interesting, when this conversation began, he hated all his cabin mates and his counselors...and now he was saying "Don't take me from my cabin." Then there was the girl who asked me, "Why can't Caz last all summer instead of just a week?" I said, "It would kill your counselors." "But," she responded, "we can get more counselors."

For a week up there we were really attempting to live out the truth of this text, we were attempting to introduce those kids, in some small way, to another world – a world where just maybe he or she who dies with the most toys does not necessarily win. We weren't perfect, heaven knows we made mistakes, but we tried. We planted some seeds, we'll see what takes root. Perhaps some Saturday, instead of going to the mall or spending the day with video games, some of those kids will go with their youth group and work in a food pantry. And in the process maybe they will discover something of what Jesus meant when he suggested that fullness of life may involve more – much more – than simply owning the biggest barn in town. But it is tough. Think of the messages we receive – if only I have enough, then I will be free...free from fear, free from the insecurities of this life, free to truly live. This is the hymn we sing every day in our culture. It is one of the crucial stories shaping our lives and the lives of our children. But is it true? We assume it is, but is it true? "All that running and running, and what I was chasing was not even real."

A pastor writes, "I've had families in my church where brother has not spoken to brother in 20 years because of a dispute over a will. How sad, how ironic, that the goods that the parents accumulated over their lifetime have become, after their deaths, the reason for the death of their family."

A man's father dies. He comes to Jesus with a concern. Is he overcome with grief over the death of his beloved father? No. He says, "Jesus, tell my brother to give me my share. I want my inheritance." There are parents whose legacy to their children is good

character, strong values, a desire to serve others, a love for the Lord. All this man left his sons was the desire for more stuff and they learned their lessons well. At the father's death, all they wanted to remember him by was his Lexus. But Jesus doesn't seem particularly interested in their upward mobility. Again, he gives no instructions on the use of wealth. "Jesus, help us feel less anxious. Cure our illnesses brought on by stress. Make up for all the time we've spent away from our children." And Jesus replies, "Who made me a judge over you in all of that? But let me tell you a little story about a man who thought that he could secure his life by amassing a whole lot of stuff. A fool with full barns and a bad heart."

Jesus refuses to take seriously what our culture takes so very seriously. Sure, I'd like to be a millionaire. It is a personally challenging text. I am a creature of this culture of bigger and better barns. So often I find myself thinking, "If I just had a little more I could really live." I don't know if I want my world destroyed. I am pretty comfortable here. It is so hard to embrace this alternative world of Jesus and the kind of life he calls us to lead.

But the good news is that we are here this morning, and that we will soon gather around the table of our Lord...pretty simple stuff – bread and a cup. A lot of other people have found a lot of other really important stuff to do this morning, but we are here. Does that mean that we are willing to hear what Jesus has to say, even when his words are tough? Does it mean that we are willing to listen, then examine our lives, maybe even begin to bend them to his will? Does it mean that we are willing to take a step into his new world, as risky as it may seem? Are we willing to let a new narrative begin to shape our lives, a narrative that suggests that what we really need is not bigger barns filled to overflowing, but bigger lives filled to overflowing – overflowing with love and generosity and self-giving and forgiveness and grace.

In the words of William Willimon, "Jesus will answer our questions that are worth asking. He will refuse to answer our questions that trivialize and demean the lives we are meant to live. Through his wisdom and his grace, he will give us lives worth living and take from us the stuff that's not worth dying for. He will give us those gifts that we need and tell us the truth. And the good news is...we have a Savior who loves to teach, to love, to save, yes even fools like us."