

Does abundance equate to a good safe life? Does amassing possessions assure us of security? Goodspeed translates Ecclesiastes 11:18-19 this way. "One man grows rich by carefulness and greed and this will be his reward. When he says, 'Now I can take my rest and enjoy my goods,' he does not know when the time will come when he will die and leave them to others." It can be translated "It does not follow, because a man has abundance that his life will consist of wealth." Or you can translate it, "A man's wealth is no guarantee for the continuance of life."

Someone in the crowd listening to Jesus perceives Jesus to be a fair person. He calls out to Jesus to "tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." This ugly dispute is all too familiar: haggling over furniture, dishes, silverware, house, land and savings account left by the deceased. The man wants Jesus to be a referee and Jesus refuses. There are laws in place to take care of the situation and the man needs to see a lawyer. Rather than act as a judge, Jesus states a truth – "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Well, we have a hard time with that. How do you know when you have enough? When does one cross the line from taking care of one's self and become a person of greed?

After Jesus makes his statement about greed, he elaborates on it with a parable. There is this farmer whose land has produced bountifully. The soil, sun, and rain have joined together in making him a wealthy man. There is no hint in this parable that the farmer has done anything wrong. He hasn't manipulated the market, he hasn't stolen from his neighbors, he has not mistreated his workers. He hasn't taken farm subsidy from the government. He has worked hard he is a wealthy man. He is so wealthy, that he has no space to store his harvest. He decides he will just tear down his barns and build bigger barns. He is not wasteful and careless.

So what is the problem? The text says he is a fool – he lives completely in and for himself. He sees no reason to thank God or to share with others. He congratulates himself and he plans for himself. He dies suddenly and the things he has accumulated will belong to someone else.

How does one move from greed and anxiety about having enough? Jesus calls for a liberation from greed and anxiety through acts of generosity. The history of the Jewish community speaks of prayer and fasting, but it always had the component of almsgiving. Leviticus 19:9-10 "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien." The early Christian community continued this caring for the neighbor.

There is no doubt that Jesus in his parable today is challenging the standard of values. One's life is made secure not by the things that one is able to amass, but by the triumph over things. Jesus equates this anxiety about things with a lack of trust in God. Birds and flowers can be our teachers when it comes to depending on God. Jesus does say we should seek God's Kingdom, but we are not to add the kingdom to the list of things about which to be anxious. We seek the Kingdom with the firm belief that it is God's desire to give us the kingdom.

The church has long made its appeal for support of budgets by assuming that where our treasure is, there will be our heart. The church has assumed that we pay attention to the words to seek first the Kingdom of God. To lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven – for where our treasure is, there will be our heart also. Sometimes we discover that the saying is true. The problem is our hearts are with our possessions.

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I love the hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory." The words to the third verse say

"Cure your children's warring madness,
bend our pride to your control.
Shame our reckless, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul"

The farmer in our parable today was rich in things and poor in soul.

Our life does consist in an abundance – but not the sort of abundance of the man who thought only of himself. Our abundance comes in our love toward God and neighbor.