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“A Fool and His Money”

A sermon by Allen Verhey

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Deut. 24:19-22; Psalm 49:1-12; Luke 12:13-21

When I was a boy, my mother gave me a small allowance –
a very small allowance, a dime.

Two things help explain why it was as small an allowance as it was.

First, I was a boy a very long time ago.

Second, my mother reinforced the stereotype of the Dutch
by being a prudent spender and a thrifty saver.

At any rate on Saturday mornings, my mother would give me a dime –
and she would often say to me

as she pressed that dime into my eager little hand,

“Now remember, Allen, a fool and his money are soon parted.”

She had probably noticed that I usually had that dime spent

on candy or an ice cream cone before the morning was over,

so she probably thought I needed this cautionary advice,

“Now remember, Allen, a fool and his money are soon parted.”

Over the years that made quite an impression on me.

No one wants to be a fool, after all.

For quite some time I was sure this line about a fool and his money
must be a quotation from the Bible.

I never found those words in Scripture,

but I wondered sometimes whether they were there somewhere,

hidden perhaps where only the most devout (like my mother)
could find them.

Well, there is this parable

about a fool who was separated from his money – and soon.

But it says something quite different about a fool

and something quite different about money

than my mother's cautionary advice, which she got, I later discovered,
not from Jesus but from Poor Richard's Almanac.

This morning I invite you to attempt with me to see that difference.

It might help to begin by imagining for a moment
that the fool of this parable was alive today.

He would probably live in a community much like Durham, NC,

drive a car much like many of those parked in the lot here at church,
and perhaps be thinking about a move to a condo.

He might not be a farmer thinking about where to store his abundant crop,
but he is probably thinking about diversifying his portfolio.

We would, I think, have a hard time telling him apart from many of our neighbors
– or from ourselves!

If we met him on the street or in the mall,

we would not nudge each other and say,

“Look, there he is! You know, the fool, the one in the parable.”

If we knew him, we would be more likely to say,

“He's no fool! He's rich!”

For, after all, a fool and his money are soon parted –

and therefore, anyone who has money is no fool!

We have all been deeply shaped by my mother's – and poor Richard's – proverb.

But Jesus called the character in his parable a “fool.” Why?

Now, I don't think Jesus called him a fool just because he was rich.

And there's nothing in the parable to suggest he has made his fortune
in some dishonest way.

Apparently he had acquired his wealth by hard work
and by the practical know-how and farsighted vision

of a good farmer (or a good businessman).
But why then does Jesus call him a fool?

One answer to that question may be found in the *self-centeredness*
of the rich man's answer to his own question,
 "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?"
His answer features his own ease and luxury
 and strikingly ignores
 both the laborers who harvested his crops and built his barns
 and the poor and hungry who could be saved by the gleanings.

Oh, I suppose he does leave the edge of his field unharvested for the poor.
 It is required by the law, after all.
But he is probably not happy about it,
 and he leaves not an inch more than is required
 by his rabbi's interpretation of Deuteronomy 24.
He does not see in his wealth the opportunity of gratitude to God
 for God's deliverance of his people from slavery
 and for God's gift of the land and its produce.
He does not see in his wealth the opportunity to celebrate the coming reign of God
 by already blessing the poor.
He does not see in his wealth the opportunity to rejoice in God's mercy
 by being generous himself.
He does not see in his wealth the opportunity of loyalty to the cause of God
 by providing for the poor, for those in need,
 for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.
And so, Jesus calls him a fool!

There is a *second* reason Jesus calls him a fool.
He was a fool because he evidently thought
 that "life consisted in the abundance of his possessions."
He was a fool because he thought money was the measure of value
 and the guarantee of security.
Money equals value.

It's a simple equation, a yuppie axiom
and frequently treated as conventional wisdom,
as if to have money proved one's virtue
and as if poverty displayed some character flaw.

When money is the measure of value,
then the acquisition and accumulation of money
is considered evidence of wisdom and virtue.

And the corollary is obvious enough:
the lack of money is a mark of moral inferiority.
A fool and his money are soon parted, after all.

But Jesus turns the conventional wisdom on its head.
"One's life," he says, "does *not* consist in the abundance of possessions."
Well, what does life consist of then?
And what is Jesus' wisdom about money?

There is another story preserved, like this one, only in Luke's gospel,
the familiar story of Zacchaeus.
Zacchaeus was a tax-collector – and rich –
and, of course, a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in the sycamore tree, the Lord Jesus Christ to see.
And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down,
for I'm going to your house today. I'm going to your house today."

And Zacchaeus, an outcast and a collaborator,
suddenly knew the grace and generosity of our Lord,
and he suddenly saw his money as an opportunity
to welcome the coming reign of God by blessing the poor,
performing both justice and mercy.

He goes beyond the claims of justice,
restoring four times what he had cheated anyone
and giving half his goods to the poor.

And Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house."
One's life, you see, does not consist in the abundance of possessions
but in welcoming Jesus
and in welcoming the good future of God that Jesus promised.

To welcome that future is wisdom,
a wisdom that practices kindness and generosity,
that feeds the hungry,
that brings relief to the poor,
and that demands justice for the oppressed.

Not to welcome that future is foolishness.

We can *either* say and live by the proposition
that one's life consists in the abundance of possessions
or we can say and live by the proposition
that one's life consists in welcoming the reign of a God
who anointed Jesus to preach good news to the poor.

The first is finally foolishness, although it passes for wisdom.
The second is finally wisdom, though it looks to all the world like foolishness.

Could any contrast be more obvious?

If we missed it here,

Luke puts the contrast in the starkest possible terms later (16:13).

We must choose, he says, between serving God or serving Mammon.

No one can serve two masters.

There *is* something idolatrous about the conventional wisdom
that money is the measure of value and the guarantee of security.

And this is a *third* reason that Jesus calls this rich farmer a "fool":

He thought his wealth could guarantee his security.

He trusted his money to secure his future and his well-being.

He said to himself, "I have ample goods.

I can *relax* and eat and drink and be merry."

The idolatry of money always says something like that.

To make this confession of faith in money completely candid,
we could paraphrase the fool's remark something like this:

"Money is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Money makes me to lie down in *green* pastures.

Money leads me beside still waters.

Money restores my soul. I will fear no evil –
for money is with me.
Its rustling and its jingling – they comfort me.”

When rendered candid, such a confession sounds foolish indeed.
Yet there is something vaguely familiar about such a creed.
It seduces us almost daily.

We may as well face it.

We live in a nation of fools. We live in cities of fools.
But we might as well face it on a more honest level than that.

You and I have often thought and acted like fools ourselves.
And what is Jesus’ wisdom about wealth?

Jesus, too, like the fool, says, “**Relax**. Be not anxious.”

There it is in verse 22, “do not worry.”

This is wisdom: to be carefree –

not because we trust in our money and our possessions

but because we may trust the lavish care and great power of God.

God will reign, and God can be trusted.

God’s good future is sure to be.

“So, relax.”

That is wisdom, a wisdom that can free us from our self-centeredness
and free us for generosity.

Once there was a rich man who lived in great luxury
and a poor man named Lazarus who, sick and hungry,
used to scavenge for the rich man’s waste.

When the poor man died,

he was carried by angels to a heavenly banquet
where he sat at Abraham’s side.

The rich man died, too, of course – not as quickly but he died.
And from his place in Hades he saw the heavenly feast –
and there Abraham and Lazarus.

He called out to Abraham for pity,

for a drop of water to cool his tongue and to ease his pain.

Abraham pitied him not.

Instead, he reminded him of his life of luxury
while Lazarus suffered and starved.

The justice was poetic – and final.

But the rich man continued to plead,

“At least warn my rich brothers and sisters,” he cried.

“Send Lazarus with the message of God’s justice and judgment.”

Again Abraham refused:

“Moses and the prophets are enough

to know of God’s concern for the poor.”

But the rich man insisted, “If one were to rise from the dead,
then my rich brothers and sisters would listen.”

And Abraham was equally insistent:

“If the rich do not listen to Moses and the prophets,

neither will they be convinced if one were to be raised from the dead.”

You recognize the parable, I suspect. It is found in Luke’s gospel.

Now, Luke knows, of course, that one has been raised from the dead.

Jesus, the one anointed to preach good news to the poor,
has been vindicated by that resurrection.

The good future of God that he promised
has been assured by that resurrection.

One has been raised from the dead! Are *we* convinced?

And do you ask, “What then shall I do?”

That was the fool’s question, you remember.

But it is not his question that must be avoided, but his answer.

“What shall I do?” is a question we will have to answer for ourselves.

Don’t be a fool!

A person’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Don’t be a fool!

Welcome the reign of God who exalts the humble,
feeds the hungry, and helps the poor.

Don’t be a fool! One has been raised from the dead.

Celebrate that resurrection
with glad and *generous* hearts,

with a lively carefree trust in God
and with loyalty to God's promise of blessing the poor.

One place for that celebration is at this table, prepared for us.
It is a gift of God, a sign of *a divine generosity* that we may trust.
It is a gift of God, given for us all *to share*.

Here we are invited to remember and to believe.

We call it the Lord's Supper
and here we remember his boundary breaking table fellowship
with rich and poor, with the righteous and sinners.

We call it Eucharist
and here we are invited to give thanks for God's great love and power.

We call it Communion,
and here we are invited to community,
to communion with Christ
and in Christ to community with one another.

We call it a foretaste of the eschatological banquet.
It is at once ordinary bread and heavenly manna,
and here we are invited to a manna economy
in which hoarding is futile,
and in which no one has too much and no one has too little.

Here the poor are always welcomed and always blessed.
It is the table of the Lord, after all.

Amen.