

“Island Living”
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Readings: Luke 12:13-21

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Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

ISLAND LIVING

Based on a novel by Nick Hornby, the movie *About A Boy* begins with a monologue by the lead character, Will Freeman.

“In my opinion” –says Will - “all men are islands. And what’s more, now’s the time to be one. This is an island age. A hundred years ago, you had to depend on other people. No one had TV or CDs or DVDs or videos... or home espresso makers. Actually, they didn’t have anything cool. Whereas now, you see... you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies and the right attitude... you can be sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists... And I like to think that perhaps I am that kind of island. I like to think I’m pretty cool. I like to think I’m Ibiza.”

Indeed when we meet Will, he has done a pretty good job of being Ibiza (Ibiza, by the way, is a luxury party island off the coast of Spain). Living off of the royalties from his deceased father’s hit single “Santa’s Super Slay”, Will has a loft full of gadgets and toys, keeps himself busily entertained, and is his own boss.

It isn't hard to see some parallels between Will and the lead character in today's parable. Like Will, our 'rich man' has come into some abundance. He has enough to last him for years without work or further toil, enough to allow him to lean back, nod slowly, and say 'you know what? Relax, eat, drink, be merry...' Be Ibiza!

And hey, Will is right! Now is definitely a time for easy island living. For turning on our iPods and tuning out the world around us. Now is a time for having your TV's or Tivo's or whatever record entire seasons of Golden Girls so that you can beat the heat, cozy and cool inside. August has just begun, so this would a great time to fit in our final escapes before the fall sweeps us away. So a part of us hears Will's monologue and thinks 'you know what, that does sound kinda tempting.'

But listen. Though in many ways we can relate to that temptation to hoard silos full of electronics, it's hard to miss the characterization of these characters. None of us suffer the delusion that these guys are supposed to be our heroes. In most of your Bibles, for instance, you will find the title of the parable written above this text as "The Rich Fool" – before you even read the story, you know this guy is setting himself up for a lesson. And Will? Within the first ten minutes of *About a Boy*, other characters are talking to him about how superficial he is – and he acknowledges it. We're clearly not supposed to think this man has it completely together. Besides,

talk about vanity of vanities – this guy thinks he is Ibiza. And you may have already gotten the chance to look at the art on the cover of your bulletin today – a painting by Rembrandt called “The Parable of the Rich Fool”. It is a beautiful painting (though it loses some vibrancy in black and white); it captures a sensation of solitude, of darkness, maybe of endless busy-work. But it hardly evokes sensations of envy or relate-ability. Really, who wants to be that guy? Surrounded by papers, barely lit within his lonely silos of numbers. With any of these caricatures, it’s easy to see that this is not where we should be headed. They quickly seem obvious fools, silly extremes, entirely unsympathetic.

But of course, as is always the case with Jesus’ parables, it is well worth our time to take a second look. Indeed while our first glance at this ‘rich fool’ rouses suspicion, our second glance might render him a bit less clear-cut. Listen again to what Jesus says:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my good. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

This time around, let us note, for instance, that he has done nothing exactly *wrong*. He has done nothing against the law. As far as we can tell, he hasn't harmed anyone. He didn't cheat or steal to get his abundance; it was simply the outcome of a rich harvest. So what exactly is the problem?

When we look at this parable within its larger context in Luke, we might get a better idea of what Jesus is really talking about. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he stops, as he is want to do, to talk to a large gathered crowd. Within this discussion – a discussion that includes a number of other parables and exhortations – this particular parable falls immediately before and after exhortations on *fear*. With this topic of 'fear' in mind, we might better understand the complexity of our Rich Man's situation. He has had a lucky harvest this year, yes, but he knows well that harvests are unpredictable. He fears next year might bring draught or flooding – it makes sense to store up some goods for the future. With large stores of crops, he can be safe from the unpredictable wiles of nature.

In this light, the man hardly seems foolish. He seems a bit like us. Really, beyond the modern island-living toys like espresso machines and DVD players, our modern lifestyles have brought us plenty of very *reasonable* ways to fill our silos. For instance, we probably all have savings accounts – good ways to feel safe in the event of a less than fruitful future year. The majority of us have insurance policies – a way to put away

current abundances so as to limit emergency costs. Most of us probably spent the better part of two decades of our lives learning, studying, earning degrees – creating silos of education or degrees in order to provide for our future careers.

These past two years have brought to painful light the unpredictability of our economy, of the market. Some lessons have been hard-learned, so we rethink our safety nets. Each of us has a story – has been blind-sided by unexpected costs, has encountered the arbitrariness of health concerns, has been burned by surprising betrayals. Our world is full of volatility – crimes, natural disasters, oil spills, war. With all of these things in mind, we work to eliminate variables; we limit the power of outside factors. It is no wonder we value self-sufficiency. If I can control my assets, my needs, my life, then I need not fear. Nothing can hurt me if I am properly prepared; no one can hurt me if I don't let them.

In our culture, vulnerability is the stuff of fools.

But in this parable Jesus tells, it is the attempt to avoid vulnerability and to protect against the fear of the unknown that is called foolish. The story of our rich man takes an abrupt ending. Immediately after setting himself up safely for the future, God speaks to him, saying: “You fool! This

very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Hearing the parable with newly sympathetic ears, this ending gets a little scary. This admonition by God is no longer something we can write of as 'that fool's' problem. This parable becomes incredibly challenging. For those of us who have the privilege to prepare for the future, are we to believe things like insurance and savings are foolish?

While I do not believe that this parable is telling us to give up all forms of insurance, here Jesus does and should challenge us to take a hard look at ourselves. To evaluate those ways we allow the false idols of preparedness and impermeability to rule our lives. Those ways we fill up our silos so as to keep the power in our own hands. Maybe filling our silos with intellect or research, so that we can outsmart whatever challenges come our way. Maybe filling them with the accoutrement of perfection and happiness, so that no one can penetrate our lives with judgment or misunderstanding.

Our silos become a kind of fortification. We fortify and re-fortify our islands. When we encounter vulnerability or uncertainty, we dig in. We take care of our own first. We become private, eying our neighbors with suspicion. When things go wrong, we seek blame, we think of ways to

protect ourselves further. We move inward, never admitting the possibility that mastery is simply beyond all of us.

And if we extend the island metaphor beyond the individual, this parable challenges us to evaluate those ways we allow these false idols of preparedness and mastery to keep us from looking beyond the island of our families, beyond our specific communities and contexts. We are challenged to look at our church island. To ask: in what ways do we allow the Presbyterian Church (USA) or Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church to be an island, self-sufficient and fortified against uncertainty? In what ways do we as a church turn inward out of fear, digging into our silos of abundance?

This parable calls us out on this, it calls us fools. Because in attempting to create earthly certainty and eliminate risk, we deny the Truth of the Gospel – the truth that we are not and never have been the ones in control. The truth that, as Ecclesiastes tells us, what is done under heaven is but “vanity and chasing after wind.”

The question of responsibility has its place. But before it, we should dwell in the space of uncertainty, in which we are all subject to the unexpected, and in which we are all dependent on - all utterly helpless before - God. Human controls will fail. Banks will collapse. Dams will

burst. Committees will err. Pastors and congregations will go astray. People will, without even meaning to, wound and betray us. They are human, and therefore broken. And we can never fortify ourselves- our islands - fully. The attempt to do so is bound to fail.

But as challenging as all of this truth is, it is truly good news. For while we are incapable of collecting enough crop ever really to satisfy our silo-filling needs, God knows our vulnerability, knows our imperfection, knows our weakness, knows our most intimate brokenness... and loves us anyway. And gave His very life for us anyway. Jesus transitions from the story of the Rich Fool directly into the Lilies of the Field – that’s the bit of Luke where Jesus says ‘if God cares enough to clothe even these lilies, *know* that God cares for *you*’. God is the one in control; and God has already deemed us loved and saved through Christ.

10AM: When we witnessed the sacrament of baptism this morning, we were witnessing and participating in the acknowledgement that we are not islands. God has already accepted and loved Henry and Emma, and in their baptisms they were sealed in connection to each one of us and we to them. Nothing Henry or Emma or any of us can do will change that connection. These living waters of baptism give us life in a way no amount of great crop or self-sufficiency could provide. The waters of baptism

cannot be stored away in silos, but must and should inspire to share, to tell, to open, to give, to move outward.

Nourished by this food/these waters, we should be able to turn to one another in our weaknesses. We should be able to admit that we need help. Comforted by our knowledge of God's love, we should have the strength to face those ways we may mistakenly think we are 'self-sufficient'. Indeed, despite what our culture would like to convince us of – what really we would like to convince our own selves of – we are often weak or wrong, maybe sad or frustrated. We don't have it all 'together' or 'figured out'. Things are often hard or overwhelming. Fully scheduled days can often feel strangely empty and futile. If nowhere else, than in church we should be able to turn to one another in need, without judgment. For in turning to God, if nowhere else, we know we can fill our true needs.

As the movie *About a Boy* proceeds, Will finds himself thrust into a relationship with a 12-year-old boy whose mother has attempted suicide. As Will struggles with this encroachment on his island life-style, he faces the pain and tears that come from relationship with unpredictable 12-year-olds and depressed mothers. He finds himself vulnerable to their needs and, after facing these risks, allows them entry anyway. In allowing the

pain and tears of relationship, he also let in love and friendship and purpose he had not known before.

In reading this parable over the last weeks, I've been consistently reminded of some words by the great philosophers Simon and Garfunkel. They are from a song you may know, "I am a Rock" –

I've built walls,

A fortress deep and mighty,

That none may penetrate.

I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.

It's laughter and its loving I disdain.

I am a rock,

I am an island.

If I never loved I never would have cried.

I am a rock,

I am an island.

I have my books

And my poetry to protect me;

I am shielded in my armor,

Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.

I touch no one and no one touches me.

I am a rock,

I am an island.

And a rock feels no pain;

And an island never cries.

Allowing ourselves to be challenged by this parable means allowing pain and allowing tears. Facing this story means being fools to society – means acknowledging weakness and vulnerability. But it also means opening our eyes to God’s offer of friendship and love. We are not rocks. We will never be luxurious Ibiza. We are not islands. And for that, thanks be to God.