



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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MANAGING OUR MIRACLES
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 12:13-21
August 2, 1992

"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?"

It was a blessed summer epiphany. A marvelously cool and breezy summer night at the beach, after a wonderful meal, surrounded by family, relaxed, content, days left on my vacation, and all was right in my world. And I considered my family--healthy, happy, well housed, well fed; and it was good, it was very good. Summer--with the family at the lake, on a long-awaited trip, or just relaxing on the patio--is a time for visions of contentment.

"Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry. Honey, bring me another cool one from the fridge and settle back in the hammock."

I hope that your summer has blessed you with similar moments of contentment. If not at the beach, then when you saw your child graduate from college in June, when you romped with your grandchildren across a green yard, or you glanced over your TIAA-CREF portfolio and took pleasure in how much you have squirreled away over the years for retirement, or pondered your scorecard, pleased to be only four over par. "Soul...relax, eat, drink, and be merry."

This morning's parable begins not in contentment, but in a quandary. A rich man has a problem. He is the beneficiary of a spectacular harvest, a harvest so great that he has nowhere to store all of the grain.

Jesus said, "He thought to himself, he deliberated within himself, had a discussion with himself, saying, 'What shall I do with all this grain that I have harvested?'"

Then, still talking to himself, he says to himself, "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."

Which seems like drastic action. He doesn't just build new barns to augment his old ones; he tears his old barns down and builds new barns, thus underscoring that this was *some* harvest. If he has made enough from this harvest to be tearing down old barns and building new ones, his harvest must be nothing short of miraculous. He hasn't just done well, he has done *very* well. Miraculously well.

"And I will say to my soul [Note that when you're this rich, this spectacularly successful, you don't need anybody else to consult with; all conversation is monologue], and I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

And I know this story. Do you?

"Number three in your whole high school class? Wow! Take off the summer before college and have a good time. You earned it."

"Yes, we have two who have really done very well, one in law school, one just finished med school. We really are very proud of them." Soul, you have been an A+ parent. Relax, eat, be merry.

"Number one receiver on the football team! That's great. At least *you* don't have to worry about how to pay for college."

"Soloist at Brightleaf? Man, do you have it made."

And I have a job, a good job, if I do say so. And my marriage is reasonably stable and my kids are good, never been in trouble. Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, be merry.

And all this stuff -- the diploma on the wall, the monthly computer printout of my IRA, the pictures of the chaste and obedient kids on the wall, the two cars, the garage door with electronic opener -- are such a comfort. They mean not only that we have done a good job of the job of life, but also that we have constructed a kind of fence around life -- full barns, a fat retirement account, a 3.5 GPR, a happy family -- all as insurance against life's vicissitudes. Thus are we able contentedly to say, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, be merry."

We call this parable "the Parable of the Rich Fool," but Jesus doesn't. Jesus begins the story, not with talk about the man, but with talk about the land and its miraculous bounty. "The land of a rich man produced abundantly." What first impresses Jesus is this miraculous, barn-bursting harvest. A gift.

But the blessing is a burden. The gift becomes a big problem. And then the story becomes, How do I manage my miracle? What should *I* do? *I* have no place to store *my* crops. *I* will do this. *I* will pull down *my* barns. *I* will store *my* grain and *my* goods. *I* will say to *my* soul. "Relax, you have ample goods laid up for many years; eat, drink, be merry."

How do I manage my miracle? It's a story about that. How do I manage *my* miracle?
How do *I* manage *my* miracle?

A friend of mine taught at Notre Dame some years ago. He said the thing that impressed him was that Catholic parents (my friend is a Methodist) had not one ounce of parental guilt. "Tell me about your children," he would say to them.

"Well, Joe's a priest in Milwaukee, Mary is living out of wedlock in Cleveland, the other six are doing various things." No guilt. Why? "Because they really believe children are gifts of God. Protestant parents believe children are projects to be managed with the right parenting techniques, proper tutoring, the correct program. Catholics believe that children are gifts of God, mysteries to be received." That's what my friend said.

It was said that a major reason that Mr. Perot dropped out of the race for the presidency was that he realized that our country is going broke. The largest claim is Social Security. Apparently, the country is bleeding itself to death, paying for retirements we really can't afford, and Mr. Perot, it is said, was smart enough to know that, unlike children, older Americans vote. The main claims on the government are not the military, welfare mothers with children, it's retirement. We are retiring not on funds we earned, but on the federal deficit.

And discussing this last week, someone said to me, "By God, we earned it, we deserve it."

I have seen it as a pastor, in the way people give to the church. There never was a correlation between a person's level of income and how much that person gave to the work of the church, at least in my churches. No, the giving is related to something else other than income. It had to do with gratitude, a sense that what I have is not what I earned or deserved but rather a gift, a trust

from God. That's my theory for why some people are givers and some are takers. It has to do with how they manage the miracle.

We have givers and takers in the university. Only a small portion of a student's education at any school is paid for in tuition. Most of the cost of education is paid for by strangers, people whom we will never know, benefactors from the past. An alumnus could give generously every year to the Annual Fund and never, in a lifetime of alumni giving, come close to what was spent on him while he was here at the university.

During our Martin Luther King observance a few years ago, one of the speakers said, "If you are black and if you have a good job and a secure family, you owe a fortune to the NAACP. When are you going to pay up?" And much the same can be said in one way or another for all of us. Coaches, teachers, doctors, nurses, janitors, pastors, people whose names we will never remember. Why is it--as we sit contentedly and gaze with pride over the achievements, the accomplishments, the acquisitions of our lives--it's all I, my, me, mine?

A psychologist here was telling me of his research relating to our self-image. He gave people some sort of problem to solve and then asked them, after they failed or succeeded, to account for their failure or success. Does it surprise you to learn that he concluded, "We tend to blame others for our failures and to give ourselves credit for our successes?"

All of the talk in this story, thus far, has been the monologue of the rich farmer. He talks to himself, plans for himself, congratulates himself, celebrates himself. I manage by my and me. It is only at the end, at the very end, that another voice intrudes into the story -- the voice of God. The voice does not accuse the rich man of injustice, of immorality, or even greed. God calls him, "You fool!"

The one whom we might call prudent, farsighted, God calls, "Fool." Why Fool? He didn't get what he got unjustly. He didn't steal like Michael Milken or Charles Keating. He didn't work at GE. Why did God call him a fool?

"You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" End of story.

A friend of mine pointed out that, actually, in the Greek it says, "Fool, this very night they shall demand your life." They? Who is the "they?" I think "they" are *the things*. The story closes with the question, "And whose will they [the things] be?" He thought the things were his problem, his opportunity, his insurance to manage as he pleased. Surprise. His life belonged to the things that managed him as *they* pleased. Can we not understand the irony of a man who thought he had so many things, only to discover, too late, too late, that his things had him?

The gadgets, the machines, the things which were supposed to make our lives easier, make our lives unmanageable. Some days it seems as if I have no other purpose in life other than to tend to, care for, and take to be fixed, these things. "I wait for the plumber to arrive, therefore I am." We thought we were managing our modern lives with all these gadgets and things only to discover that the things were managing us.

A recent PBS series on the dilemmas, the horrors, the byproducts of modern medicine was entitled, "Managing our Miracles." We thought we had these things. Surprise, they have us.

It's all monologue, as we pat ourselves on the back for our great material progress, our medical, technological miracles, our great work as A+ parents, our high SAT scores, our homes, our jobs, our health, our lives. And just when we get it all fenced in, hedged well about, insured, locked in, there comes that voice from the outside, that intrusive voice which is God's, that is,

reality, "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night they shall demand your life of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

This move from self-satisfied, fat, contented, self-congratulatory monologue to dark, intrusive, realistic address by God is somber but real.

The Psalm says (Ps. 14:1), "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" There is just me, myself, mine and my management of my achievements. There is no miracle, no food, family, future, as a gift. It is all mine, to be managed for me. I am a *self-made* man. There is no transcendent, external, higher claim laid upon me and my possessions other than my own comfort, contentment, and pleasure. No connection between my resources and my responsibilities. As Erasmus said, "A self-made man is but a testimony to the shoddiness of unskilled labor." The fool says in his heart, "There isn't a God."

Note that God doesn't punish anyone here--unless reality be considered punishment enough. The intruding voice of God states only the facts, just the facts. "Fool! This night *they* demand your life of you. And all this management and preparation, these big barns and prudent insurance, whose will they be?"

And once again (How many Sundays has this happened?), the voice intrudes into my false security, my smug contentment. I am addressed, called "Fool." The beginning of the end of our foolishness is to learn by heart, "It is God who hath made us and not we ourselves" (Ps. 100:3).

NOTES: I decided that the preceding question about inheritance (Lk. 12:13-15) and the moralizing conclusion (Lk. 12:21) have little to do with the parable itself and decided to preach on the parable of the Rich Man alone. The opening statement, that he was both rich *and* had many lands seems redundant but is probably meant to underscore that this man is not simply blessed by wealth; he is *very* blessed. The rather drastic action of tearing down present barns to build new ones further underscores that the harvest is huge, nothing short of miraculous. The man has been given a miracle.

How does he interpret his miraculous gift from God? That seems to me to be the key problem posed by the parable. His soliloquy shows that he makes no connection between his good fortune and God's graciousness or his responsibility to that graciousness. He becomes the only voice in the story, the sole narrator. His problem is solved by his own self-satisfied action. Now he can "relax, eat, drink, be merry."

"But God said...." Here is the unexpected intrusion, a new, intruding voice which disrupts his complacency, not with active divine judgment, but rather with the reality of the limits of life. His fortification crumbles and his false security is unmasked. His prudence is revealed to be foolishness. I see in this parable a part of the biblical wisdom tradition (cf. Proverbs, some Psalms, Sirach).

I am indebted to Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Fortress, 1989, pp. 127-140), for my interpretation of this parable.