

Travel Stories: *The Barn* - wk 3

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - July 26, 2020
Luke 12:13-21 *The Message paraphrase* (Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

We're continuing our message series looking at some of Jesus' conversations. These are the Travel Stories Jesus' told, while walking along and participating in the common things of life. As a companion for this series, I'm drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*.

An unnamed person steps out of the crowd and addresses Jesus with this, **"Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me"** (Luke 12:13).

The man, it seems, is being defrauded by his brother of his inheritance and asks Jesus to help right the wrong. Here's the surprising response, though, Jesus refuses to help him, disclaiming authority to do so, **"Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"** Eugene Peterson says the question is rhetorical, requiring a negative answer. Meaning, no one has appointed Jesus as the judge or arbitrator in this man's family affairs.

We're probably surprised by this response. *"Really Jesus? You don't want justice for this man?"* And in that day, Jesus' response would have seemed odd because rabbis were judges in the Jewish community.

The man's request is not out of line. He is doing exactly what Jesus taught us to do: **"Ask...seek...knock..."** The man

is praying, and praying the way Jesus taught him to pray - using the personal vocative (“Teacher!”) and using a verb in the imperative addressed personally to Jesus. But he gets dismissed abruptly.

Eugene Peterson says, *“So much for prayer as a formula. The man is following to the letter Jesus’ teaching to His disciples on prayer. If prayer is a matter of getting the correct grammar addressed to the right person, this man would have gotten his way.”*

Why this response? There is nothing in the text to indicate that the man was not being defrauded. He probably was. His rights were being violated. And it is certainly not God’s will that any of our rights be trampled by others. Justice is essential to the Kingdom of God. All the Hebrew prophets from Isaiah to Malachi insisted upon it, and even John the Baptist and Jesus insist on it.

So, then there is nothing technically wrong in what the man asks for or the way he asks for it. He is asking for the very justice that Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah had taught him was foundational in God’s kingdom.

Why then this response? Jesus must have discerned in the request not a passion for justice, but the sin of greed, of coveting. Jesus story then gets to the truth of what’s going on in the man’s heart. The story that Jesus tells ignores the man’s “rights” and focuses on the man’s greed. But not directly. Jesus preserves his dignity.

If the man is coveting, do you think the man will see himself in the story of the barn builder? He may or he may not. The same with us. Watch what Jesus gently does. When Jesus tells the story, we all kind of enter into it, don't we? We may ask, "*Am I the barn builder?*" "*Do I have enough and I want more?*"

But by not forcing the man to say he's the greedy barn builder, the parable preserves his dignity. He's probably not a farmer, so he enters into the story only if he wants to. By telling a story out of the ordinary stuff of our common life - in this case building a bigger barn - Jesus speaks of a common desire we have. Where to hold our stuff?

Building a barn is normal work for a farmer. No one would ever think of it as a sin or moral failure. No farmer was ever reprimanded by his pastor or put in jail by the sheriff for building a barn. The story about the barn builder does not condemn anyone. It just gets us thinking. Eugene Peterson says, "*It just sits there, unobtrusive in our imaginations - and then we think about it and get it.*"

Did the man in the crowd wait around long enough to get it? Or because it had never even occurred to him to ever build a barn, did he impatiently walk away and continue to look around for a rabbi who would take up his cause for justice?

Now it doesn't take us long to realize that we are living in a world full of wealth. And I'm not just talking about wealth

from money. Our God is incredibly generous with grace and love for us. We are given what we need, but also much, much more. We are given beautiful sunsets and shade trees, but not just a few, we are given daily sunsets and entire forests full of redwood and oak. Creation is full of beautiful, abundant wealth from God.

This wealth is also inside us. God does not barely save us, giving just enough grace to get us to heaven. He is lavish. When we pause to consider, as this story can help us do, we find ourselves in the middle of life saying, “**my cup runneth over!**”

And what is the purpose of the wealth we have? Wealth is love to be shared. It's Jesus' people who learn to enjoy all the good things of this earth as gifts from God. All of this is good. But Jesus also warns us of the risk involved with wealth, we might spend time getting it, begin coveting it, and then not spend time blessing our neighbors with it.

How many times have we prayed, “*Father, give me what I need*” and forgotten to pray also, “*Father, give me what my neighbor needs*”?

Eugene Peterson says, we risk becoming greedy when we quit thinking of wealth as love to be shared. Building barns is so obviously a good thing, but it's not the final goal. If we keep building, we won't have much time left over for the time-consuming work of loving our neighbors.

When it takes up a spot in our imaginations, Jesus story awakens us. All our wealth is love-and-grace-wealth. We are never actually power-wealthy, money-wealthy, influence-wealthy. We are only and always love-wealthy. Jesus drives home the heart-felt message of this parable, **“You count to God.”**

He continued this subject with his disciples. “Don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more. (Luke 12:22-24 MSG)

When we consider all the goods of the earth as gifts from God, including the birds and the wildlife and all God’s beautiful creation; when we consider the beauty of God’s creation, it changes our perspective and we see how wealthy in love and grace we are. How often can a beautiful vista change our outlook to see how generous God is and how rich in His love we are?

In the wealth of love and grace we have far more than enough, we have so much of our Heavenly Father’s love and life in us, we begin to see we can share it. We can begin to pray, not only, *“Father, give me what I need,”* but *“Father, give me what my neighbor needs.”*

This barn story of Jesus slowly reminds us to have as much concern for the well-being of other's as our own. We need our daily bread and their daily bread. Slowly the three loaves of bread for a friend in Jesus' second story, becomes more important than making sure we have more than enough bread for ourselves. Wealth is love to be shared.

Would you pray with me?

Father in heaven, You have revealed Your love and care for us in the words and works of Jesus. Today, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, grant us grace that we may be like the wise who build their lives on sure foundations. When the rains fall: be our hope. When the floods come: be our stay. When the winds blow: be our rest. When a neighbor knocks: help us to give love and grace to others. In Jesus Name, Amen.