

Hosea 11:1-11
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

There's a line in today's gospel lesson I just love: "You fool!" And I love that it's God who says it.

"You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you." God doesn't say such things lightly. There is a technical definition of a fool in the fourteenth Psalm: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good."

God says to this particular fool: "Your life is over. What does it matter that you're barns aren't big enough?" Too bad that farmer didn't live in our age where storing America's abundance is an industry! The U.S. self-storage industry reports revenue of \$38 billion dollars. Every year: \$38 billion.¹

Many Bible translations call this particular passage the Parable of the Rich Fool. There's a couple of things we can tease out of his story for our benefit. One is that he has a control problem. The other is that he has an "I" problem. Hear part of the passage again and see if you can count the number of times the man uses the first-person pronoun "I" – referring to himself:

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."' "

What you'd get? Six? "**I** will pull down. **I** will build. **I** will store." He has an "I" problem. Not only is this man godless, he is friendless. He is the only one in his world. He has no neighbors. Well, certainly people live nearby but he doesn't care. He is isolated in a world of "MY crops...MY barns...MY grain...MY goods."

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard asked, "Can there be something in life that has enough power over us to make us forget all that is good?" Enough power over us? To forget the good?

Has this farmer forgotten the principle of gleaning? God commanded the Israelites to leave some grain unharvested for widows and foreigners to collect. Leaving something "on the table" is one of the easiest ways to share. He has acted shamelessly by harvesting the land down to nothing. And speaking of the land, has he forgotten that it and its ability to produce are gifts from God?

¹ Alexander Harris, "U.S. self-storage industry statistics," March 11, 2019, <https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/news/1432-self-storage-industry-statistics/>

Jesus is not condemning wealth in the Parable of the Rich Fool. Neither is he condemning wealth in the Parable of the Rich Young Man. He was the one who asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said keep the commandments and love your neighbor as yourself. “I have kept all these from my youth up,” the young man replied causing Jesus to discern that far from being godless, this man was a spiritual seeker.

“Go, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor; then come, follow me.” And the young man turned away because it was just too much to ask.

In both cases, wealth stood between these men and God. The first man, the farmer, just loved money so much that it and he were all that mattered. The other man: I don’t know. I don’t know what his issues were. I hope the two men are not the same person: one in youth; the other in later years.

Jesus doesn’t ask all his followers to empty their bank accounts just to become a Christian. He does ask that we empty ourselves of whatever comes between us and Loving Splendor. Holy Light. The Divine Life. Put that first, Jesus says. Put God first.

We do that, or else we would not be here this morning. Our lives are a road trip of daily putting God first more and more. Over time and with practice, we become more and more God-centric and have less and less of an “I” problem.

The other issue with the Rich Fool is control. For him, life would never be out of control again with enough food, wealth, and shelter. He told his soul to eat, drink and be merry. He had tamed the merciless world and had everything under control.

We like to be in control. Certainly there are extremes of controlling behavior. There are those who are manipulative and deceitful. People who are deceitful just want to get their own way. And periods of great stress can make even the most-well-adjusted person a control freak. When our whole world is in chaos, we may just want some small measure of control on our environment. Like deciding what’s for dinner. “I want pizza tonight. I don’t care what the rest of the family wants, I want pizza.”

Apart from the extremes, issues of control boil down to trust. Whom do you trust? Yourself, preeminently, but what about God? Can you trust God with your health? With your money? With relationships? Or do you do a better job of managing those things on your own?

All of us have had our trust violated. All of us have trust issues to some degree or another. There are just too many ways to count how our parents have damaged our trust in them; or how our siblings have or our partners or friends. If you have a trust issue you are – no doubt – entitled to it. But it will hobble your life. Trust violated by others makes it so hard to trust God.

But trust can be cultivated. It can be healed and transformed. It starts with the idea of surrender. Just like the very first step of a 12-step program, we admit we are powerless. We are not in control, not even of ourselves. But there is one who is.

When we yield ourselves more fully to God, day by day, we actually become more of who we truly are. We do not become puppets on a string that God controls. We become open to God, Christ-centered, Spirit-filled.

Trust is predicated on relationship. The Rich Fool had no relationship with God so had no recourse to prayer, inspiration or encouragement. But the man who fell off a mountain did have a relationship with God.

There's a version of this story that ends as a joke. This is not that version. This one tells the tragedy of not trusting.

The story goes that a climber got lost and became disoriented, even as night fell. He kept climbing hoping to reach level ground when suddenly, he fell. He felt the terrible sensation of being pulled by gravity and in those moments of great fear, what came to mind was all the good and bad episodes of his life. He realized death was likely when, finally, all the slack was gone from his rope and he was held fast, in mid-air. Only the rope was holding him, and in that moment of stillness he had no other choice but to scream: *"Help me, God!"*

God answered. *"What do you want me to do?"*

"Save me, God." And God replied: *"Do you really think I can save you?"*

The man said he was confident in God's saving grace. Then he heard: *"Cut the rope."*

After a long moment of silence, the man decided to hold on to the rope that much tighter. He just could not imagine letting go. The next morning a rescue team reported finding a climber dead and frozen, his body hanging from a rope ... his hands grasping it ... only one foot from the ground.

Not trusting will hobble your life. Asserting your control above all else will leave you impoverished. Practice trusting God even if you have for decades because there is always more to the spiritual journey.

Amen.