

Secret of Everything That Matters

Luke 12:13-21, Ecclesiastes 12, Mark 8:34-37

Many years ago, the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia purchased a Vincent Van Gogh painting entitled “Head of a Man” for \$3,500.

It was typical of Van Gogh’s work—a portrait of a bearded, curly haired man against a brownish background. Over the years, the painting increased in value to \$21 million dollars.

Years after the purchase, the painting was lent to an exhibit at the Dean Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland. While there, critics raised a question: “Is it really a Van Gogh painting?”

Soon, the painting was sent to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam for study. Their art experts determined that although it was not a forgery—because it wasn’t signed by Van Gogh—it simply had not been painted by Van Gogh, but instead by one of his contemporaries who was seeking to imitate Van Gogh’s style.

So one day the painting as worth \$21 million.

The next day it was worth \$3,500 again. Same painting!—but with a very different value!

Jesus would have understood this situation.

Jesus was concerned with the things in which people placed value.

In the midst of a disagreement between two siblings over an inheritance, Jesus told a story.

Once upon a time, in the fertile region of ancient Israel, there lived a certain farmer.

Now let's suppose that Jesus knew this farmer.

As a youth and young adult, Jesus came to know this farmer quite well.

How? He got to know him by working for him as a carpenter.

Jesus was one of the workers who helped to build and repair things for the farmer—wagons, sheds, yoke for his oxen, barns to store the farmer's crops, wood tools for the farmer's laborers when they went out into the fields to harvest the grain or when they were working in the barns.

But this farmer did not pay his laborers well.

He did not pay Jesus fairly either.

Even when he had one good year after another with his crops of wheat, barley and grapes, still he did not use his gains to reward his workers.

Instead, he put all his gains into bigger and bigger and bigger barns. Some of his friends warned him that he was being foolish.

"Your workers are going to leave you when they get a chance," they told him. "You don't pay them fairly, and they might be able to put up with it if you were not doing well, but you're becoming rich, and yet you still don't reward them for working hard for you."

But the farmer did not listen.

"You don't need all new barns all at once" another told him. "Replace your barns slowly, as they deteriorate, over a period of years.

Our village needs a synagogue school and a better community well.

We can't do it by ourselves. You could help us."

But the farmer did not listen.

“You’re not taking care of your health.” another said. “You talk about “Eat, drink and be merry.”, but you should see yourself the next morning. You don’t look well at all. What’s going to happen to your family if your health fails?”

But the farmer did not listen.

Instead, he went on partying, building bigger and bigger barns, paying his workers—including Jesus—one of his best carpenters—less than they deserved, especially since it was their work that was helping him to succeed.

While he gloried in his success, his village languished and struggled.

Then one night the farmer became sick. As his condition worsened through the wee hours, he became frightened and began to regret how he had treated people, even his own family.

He tried to pray but couldn’t because he had never spent any time learning how.

Early the next morning, before the sun came up, he died, alone and afraid, mumbling about wanting another chance.

This man’s life and his fate must have made a lasting impression on Jesus.

He saw a clear warning in the man’s life, which he delivered at the beginning to the arguing brothers:

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then notice his concluding description of the farmer, a unique metaphor.

He calls him a fool for being rich toward himself, but not rich toward God.

I think the challenge of this parable is very personal.

In other words, how will you apply this parable in your personal life?

How will you be rich toward God in your personal life and in your relationships with others?

Then, how apply it to the principle, threatening conditions the human being faces today—degradation of the earth, extreme inequality, the continuing global and local disaster which WE Dubois called “the unparalleled problem of the color line” in the 20th century’s. Now the 21st as well.

I will speak to a larger, social application first, then turn to the personal application of this parable.

Right now, with respect to the planet, we need to become rich toward the largest, most profound being we are personally acquainted with—Mother Earth.

In order to be rich toward Mother Earth, we need to take the Haudenosaumee wisdom which Dennis Yerry(who, by the way, has just become a grandfather) taught us, “Always look back 7 generations and look ahead 7 generations when making a decision.”

That’s hard in our quickaholic, “get rich and get successful quick” world.

But it’s important right now that we think about what kind of world the babies and infants of today will see when they are eighty years old.

If we still want to see coastal areas above water, if we will want to see glaciers and ice caps, many island nations, and if we want to avoid more and

more extreme droughts and cold, more extinctions, more food insecurity, then we have to keep the global average temperature from rising 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. As of now, we are one degree above pre-industrial levels.

At current rates, we will hit 1.5 in 10-30 years. That's not far away. And even at 1.5 the environment is more degraded than it is currently.

We need to work to prevent that from happening, because a rise of 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels will result in catastrophe for the children being born today.

We need to stop the planetary thermostat from rising by reducing fossil fuels, increasing renewables—conserving energy in the way we build, light, heat, cool, and eat—preserve forests, plant new forests, become rich toward all the plant and tree families, become rich toward the four leggeds and the two wings, instead of being rich only to ourselves.

That's a big enough challenge all by itself, and requires us to take action personally and join with others in changing our attitudes and behaviors.

Within the setting of Westport Presbyterian Church, you can join our Earth Care Team. Right now, we are beginning to think about how we can become involved in a city council committee initiative to make new construction in Kansas City more Green—and how we can mobilize Presbyterians to reduce the export of liquified natural gas which only encourages more extraction of fossil fuels.

The dilemma of course is not simultaneously destroying jobs, increasing poverty and harming families and workers.

That puzzle is not impossible to solve. If we can put a vehicle on Mars, we can figure out how to preserve the income of workers needing to change jobs or careers.

That's why the sign in the Storefront of the church says, "A Living Wage on a Living Planet".

A way right now to reduce global and local extreme inequality is to establish a floor income for people who are working is \$30,000 a year, which is what the \$15 month minimum wage brings in annual income. Such a move would have a profound impact in reducing child poverty, stabilizing families, increasing access to health care, housing and education. Think of it as floor income for people who are working, just as we have a floor income for people who are older and no longer working.

Then I want to mention an anti-racism initiative I am helping to lead right now. A team of 9 Black, Brown and White Presbyterians are in the process of doing a search and then contracting with an experienced, local African American organizer to work with us, the PUIMN and Presbytery on issues of systemic racism in our region. We will be partnering with new and legacy civil rights and human rights organizations in the area. Stan Morgan is involved with this. Rev. Rodget Nishioka at Village, Naomi Tolentino in Grandview Park, Rev. Eric Garbison, Cherith Brook and others. Sandi Moss, Covenant Presbyterian, Kim Carter, Linwood. Stay tuned.

We can do this. These are ways for us, in our current condition, to be rich toward God.

"I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was without adequate clothing and you clothed me. I was sick and you gave me medical care I needed."

Let me now apply to personal life this Jesus message about the man traditionally known as The Rich Fool.

To this day, the youngest person to climb the highest mountain in the Rocky Mountain National Park is 8 year old Harriet Peters. harriet made the climb to fulfill her recently deceased mother's desire to reach the top of Long's Peak.

Her story is told in the thrilling children's book "High As A Hawk".

But Harriet made the climb under the guidance of the person who is known as the Founder of Rocky Mountain National Park, Enos Mills.

Mills was born in Kansas on a farm near Pleasanton.

Ill throughout his childhood, a doctor told his parents he would not survive adolescence. His parents decided that the dirty, dusty farm life wasn't for their son, and they encouraged him to go live in Colorado. So with his parents' blessing, he hitchhiked to Kansas City, and got a job at a local bakery to earn enough money for a train ticket. He took the train to Colorado, where his older sister, Belle, lived.

He later went to Estes Park, where, over a lifetime of hiking, mountain climbing and guiding, he became a fierce advocate for the park, putting his own money into its establishment, and finally personally inviting political leaders to join him there, eventually leading to the land being set aside for the public instead of commercial interests.

Mills once explained why he climbed Long's Peak so many times and why he encouraged others to hike and climb in the park:

Your thoughts gain altitude!

New vistas appear!

And because of the mountains' geologic age—both the rocks that remain, and the forces of wind and water that transform them—**it helps one gain resolve.**

I appreciate Mills' wisdom for its own sake, and I also appreciate it because as a Christian, it helps me understand the reason for taking the path of the Christian life.

That is, by aiming higher spiritually—by aiming to climb upward into the Kingdom of God in this life and by aiming to climb upward to the Kingdom of Heaven in the next life, we aim for another realm.

We seek, with resolve, another realm of living, profoundly different from this one.

And as a result, our prayers gain altitude!

New vistas appear through which we can see ourselves as forgiving persons, as persons who are brave in love, courageous in mercy, persistent in seeking justice and goodness in daily living.

And we end up spending time in places such as this and other places and situations which, because of the words that have been spoken— the hymns sung— goodness fought for and love displayed generation after generation after generation—help you to gain resolve to live in that 5th dimensional realm where the beauty of your life and your joy in living and all those other things we call soul can grow larger and larger with each passing day.

In the end, this is our bridge to God, in this life and the life to come.

This is the way we connect to God, in this world and the world to come.

Remember what Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life...”

Do you hear that?

The life!!

Life with Jesus is life itself!

Life with Jesus is what truly makes life worth living!

Life in the company of Christ—you becoming rich toward God—
will lead you away from all the things that don't really matter very
much and will lead you instead into the Secret of—

EVERYTHING!!—THAT REALLY MATTERS!

Rev. Scott Myers
Feb. 28, 2021 2nd Sunday of Lent
Westport Presbyterian Church